



Human

Den

Holson

Fict or Fuct!



10011

So... A book called 'Human'; 'Fict or Fuct!' scribble on the cover. For crazycuts only, by the look (no quarter asked or given).

Chap scrabbles out from an everyday life, searching for himself and his dead mother – wondering why he often feels he isn't who he says he is; that he isn't real. Struggles with the logic of existence for a bit: makes mind-expanding discoveries along the way about fact, fiction, and the arcane art of the soulcatcher; finally ends up somewhere unexpected, conspiring to recruit a genius like you to help save humanity from itself (through transcendence – whatever that is).

Want to give it a whirl, too, don't you, doozy-drawers; change the world an' all?

Course you do! Brilliant mind like yours?  
Who else, if not you, right?

So what you waiting for, munchkin? Applause? More chance of catching the clap around here, oh worthy one...

Open it, go on, why don't you.  
See if you don't end up somewhere interesting...

This is a work of fiction. Incidents, names and characters, are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

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## [Conference insert]

### Letter To Delegates From Ate Lol

It's fair to say the decision to republish this work as part of our twenty-fifth anniversary celebrations and include it in your packs was not taken without a good deal of angst and soul-searching amongst colleagues and other Federation worthies.

Once upon a time, we were pleased to call it seminal. Today, it seems, the great thinkers and researchers of the multi-disciplinary enterprise we built round the **HUMANS** project (**H**olistic **U**nderpinnings of **M**indful **A**wareness in the **N**oetic **S**ciences in case you've forgotten) apparently find the 'tone pontifical', the 'language fanciful'\*\*, the 'humour dubious', the 'methodology idiosyncratic', and the author 'a sad and half-demented, drug-crazed Scotch diarist, fumbling his way towards an accidental discovery he barely comprehends' (to quote just a few).

Unsurprisingly, I suppose, we now see others – Donal, Emm, Jesh, Joa, Gem, Anjo, Stese – as our worthy predecessors. When the populist Holson is mentioned, we feel like some Victorians did when Darwin said their Mums and Dads were hairy monkeys.

In the end, though, a sufficient number of us pushed long and hard enough to secure inclusion, arguing finally

and successfully, that an unwillingness to countenance this on the grounds being given was itself an indication that many of us had yet to evolve to the level all humans now claim to aspire to.

Colleagues, it is with this in mind, and in this spirit, that I now commend this early example of our craft to you all and urge you to revisit its many lessons.

This year, above all years, we should look to our future, but honour our past.

Herein lies our genesis, friends and delegates – whether we like it or not.

**Fictal Prime Ate Lol, 15.6.2040**

**\*\*Delegates mystified by some of Holson's language (like the Scots word 'sleekit' for 'sly') can find elucidations on the Internet. Other oddities like 'Kurt V' and 'Tim L.' are mostly guessable (the 'V' is for Vonnegut, we think, and the 'L' for Leary). As for terms he misappropriated ('the gloomy' for example), or just made up ('duttled'?!), don't even get me started...**

**Archives A.I.**

# Human

by

Den Holson

*For all of my family and other friends,  
but especially Margaret, warm and close,  
Sammy the champion gymnast,  
and Bee of the golden charm.*

## Prologue

There's a place where fact can become fiction and fiction fact.

A place we all know, where these things actually happen.

...Found my mother's soul there, I did.

...Answers to some questions I had:

How I got to where I was from where I started out.

Why I often felt I wasn't who I said I was – that I wasn't real.

Who we all are and what we're all doing here – that stuff too.

—No, no, I'm not joking.

(Well... maybe just a bit.)



## Burning Questions

*In which our earnest seeker after truth starts out on his search for personal answers knowing less than nothing – lost as a daft wee lamb.*

*Entirely the best place to start if transcendence is your goal, so I've heard – and more or less inescapable for Bozo here, who won't know he's heading that way for quite a while yet.*

*You're probably ahead of him already, in fact.*

*Sharp as a knife I bet you are.*

*Just like me...*

**Tuten Leswan**

## The Way Home

It all started for real when Bee saved the day for me: showed me I could follow a trail I'd neglected till now; finally confirmed I'd been hunting the wrong onion in Dundee's Eastern Cemetery...

My little quest appeared dead and buried when she picked me up after my down of a bus trip, but driving us home from Shields Road subway, she turned the day on its head; got me back on the case.

—How I'll crack on with it isn't quite clear yet, but Bee has me all hoped up again: believing I now have a whiff of an inkling of what I should do next; that there's a bleary glimmer of light at the hazy end of a tunnel I'd thought was impassable...

\*

Bee knew the story, of course; how could she not?

I'd told her over and over I wanted, not just to find my mother's grave after all this time – she died when I was a baby of less than eighteen months – but also to somehow make a connection with someone who should have been at the heart of my life, but was only a girl I couldn't remember having seen except in a framed photograph.

—She was only twenty-three when she died in 1952; how sad is that?

I'd looked at her picture a lot over the years but it never seemed to bring her any closer...

Might have been different I suppose if the portrait itself hadn't been a bit lifeless – very formal and posed – or if there had been several snaps, showing her in various real-life situations...

But there was only this one shot: a black and white take of a serious-looking girl – beautiful rather than pretty I'd say – with clear eyes and skin, a challenging look, a nice (can't think of a better word for it) nose, and soft-looking feminine lips...

Sometimes I think there might be the trace of a half-smile there, but I'm never sure...

\*

Took me half a lifetime to go looking for her, and I can't really say I know why that is...

Probably, part of the explanation is that (aside, I assume, from early on), she was never a part of my life...

Two and a bit years after she died, Dad got married again.

I don't know the exact dates, but I do remember riding in the smoky cab of the removal lorry with 'Mum', heading for Douglas and Angus, the then-new Dundee housing scheme I grew up in.

...And being four years old.

(And eating spam sandwiches.)

—That would have been a matter of months before the first of my two sisters was born, I guess...

I grew up thinking we all had the same mother, and only discovered otherwise (and by accident) when I was seventeen. (Another story...)

After that, I tried a few times to nudge Dad into talking about my real mum... But he never took the hint, and – before I knew it, it seems – he was gone as well and it was all too late...

\*

—And that's also part of the reason, I think: Dad's vanishing act.

Instructor to the last that he was (he was always explaining things to me in that patient voice he had), Dad taught me a couple of things by dying.

...Showed me death for the first time for one: taught me that, whatever might or might not be true about people having an immortal soul, they do have a soul of sorts.

I was away the day he died but when I came back and saw him lying there, I knew it wasn't him.

Whatever essence it was that made him my Dad – immortal soul or not – was gone.

...Except that, I soon realised – herewith the second lesson – it wasn't.

...In some important sense it lived on in me, not just biologically, but as a voice, a presence, a kindness, that

was still somehow there in the ravelling corridors of my own soul – and still is...

I refused to see the commemorative plaque thing they put up after the crematorium service: as far as I was concerned, it had nothing to do with Dad.

Shortly after he died, I wrote down what I called ‘a mark in time for... an unsung hero’ as a kind of epitaph to him and that was his headstone by my lights...

He didn’t need some depressing plastic plaque as a reminder, he wasn’t there.

The thing that defined him – his soul if you want to call it that – was either here inside me or (as he would probably have had it) away in some more interesting place, leaving me with only an echo.

—Echo or not, though, that inner voice and scribbled down epitaph commemorate him better to me than any inscription could...

In the many decades that have passed since he died, I’ve never visited the bit of municipal grass where his ashes were scattered – at least until the time I’ll get to presently...

Whatever is there, it isn’t him...

Even though there’s a little green and white plastic tag stuck in the grass with his name on it to tell you different...

—So, yes, I’m guessing that’s the second part of why it took me so long to go looking for Mum: whatever was lost wasn’t to be found in some dismal downer of a

cemetery.

The missing piece was either inside me, or it wasn't anywhere I could touch...

The phantom I was looking for wasn't likely to be found haunting some old boneyard, but lingering unrecognised in some distant memory of childhood: the ghost of a smile that must have been the centre of my life when I was a baby perhaps, or a half-remembered scent of security...

Not something you'd expect to find in a Dundee graveyard, all in all...

—Which probably makes you wonder why I went looking there, huh?

...Hard to say, really.

I was less than convinced of a positive outcome, if I'm honest, but I couldn't come up with anything else first off.

The jolt of looking in the mirror one morning and seeing a faint trace of grey in my hair suddenly made the whole thing a burning issue: had me all fired up with detecting zeal, needing to solve a puzzle that had been bubbling under for some years, but had now taken centre stage due to a hairy intimation of mortality: the compelling mystery of how I'd got to where I'd ended up from where I'd started out.

...All fired up, but with nowhere to go that I could think of, other than back to my home town in search of a headstone I'd never seen.

\*

(—Plus, I thought I already knew everything else worth knowing, you see...

The only real mystery seemed to be how it had managed to get so late in the day so fast – echo of Dad's voice saying 'you think you have forever, but you don't...

—That and a complete lack of connection with a mother I must have been close to as a baby but now couldn't remember at all, even when I looked at her picture.)

\*

Anyway: I planned the trip to Dundee and off I went in search of answers, armed with a plan to visit old haunts, but mainly a cemetery and a memorial garden.

...Not sure what I expected to happen when I got there, exactly. ...Just something that would give me some kind of emotional hook-in to a mother greatly missed (but not really remembered) by her one son and only child.

—Nothing much did, though. (Happen, I mean.)

Found myself on the bus back to Glasgow, feeling very low and wondering what on earth it was I'd been hoping for...

\*

I'd visited with Dad too, of course – and that had been fine...

There was new stuff to tell him: that Bee and I had married; that he had two great (meaning wonderful) grandchildren – our son, Kirn, and daughter, Rio; and that I was sorry he'd never known them and that they'd never met him... (An even bigger disconnect I now realised than the one I had with my mother.)

...The visit to Mum's grave, though, was... I don't know: I don't seem to have the words... In the end, a stone – even one with your long lost mother's name on it – is just a stone: even more soulless than the dead husk of a body we leave behind when we go...

I couldn't find my mother there – even though I made her picture my mobile phone wallpaper and tried using it to have the same (silent) conversation with her I'd had with Dad...

All I found in Dundee were more disconnects: Dad and Mum in different cemeteries. Mum in a place I'd passed several times a week until I was seventeen without knowing she was there. ...And this overturned faceless stone which seemed to mean nothing at all. (even less than the one photograph that was my only real link...).

...Headed back to the bus station distracted and confused, found the stance for Glasgow, fumbled my ticket out, and flopped into a seat feeling wretched and moody (and very unsure of myself).

—And of course, the bus broke down on the way back



(it would, wouldn't it?), the journey time lengthened by an hour...

I sent Bee a txt to let her know I'd be late – and she replied to say she'd pick me up at Shields Road underground station...

(The place where this tale of mine started, you'll recall...

—But not quite where it ends.)

\*

About a third of the way home, Bee drew us into the kerb and suggested a walk in the park while the sun was still warm.

To 'cheer me up', she said...

I could tell she was planning something pretty much right away but I went along with it anyway, and, sure enough, a little over halfway into our stroll round Maxwell Park pond, she said she had something to show me.

...Something that would help me connect with my mother, she said, slipping it from her handbag with a flourish and pushing it close to the end of my nose where I couldn't fail to see it.

...Another picture I only had one of, oddly enough – a favoured dog I'd had when the world was young. (Or I was, anyway...)

...A black and white, long-haired collie we'd inevitably called Lassie.

—What did it have to do with my mother, though?

What did it have to do with anything?

The question was in my eyes as I looked back up at Bee – and she answered it with an air of mock exasperation, indicating with her finger that I shouldn't be looking at the dog (stupid!) but at the face of the person standing next to it.

...A face I was suddenly then seeing for the first time – the clear eyes and skin and soft (did I say feminine?) lips now unmistakable; that trace of a smile...

Mum's face.

Gazing back out at me from a picture of myself at fifteen...

\*

Precisely how I felt at that moment is hard to recall...

I know I gave Bee a hug or six and went off home in a dizzy spin – thinking in the main that my first suspicions had been right: any answers to be found were somewhere in the murk of my own forgotten past, not in the remains of my mother's...

—And that I suddenly felt I was hot on the trail again: that too, definitely...

Sure that what I was looking for was the kind of emotional connection with Mum the Lassie snap had found in me...

(And that there were – as Bee and her little surprise had just proved – ways of exploring the possibilities of that I hadn't quite figured out yet...)

## Here Be Dragons

Something I never imagined happens when you sit down to write a story – happens to me, at any rate...

You find yourself looking in places you never thought to look and finding things you never would or could have thought to search for if you hadn't started writing; hadn't gone looking...

It's really quite exciting...

I still don't have an answer to that 'how did I get here from there?' question that sent me looking for my mother, but I now know where to look I think...

More than that, I now know the answer to a question I never thought to ask before I sat down to write.

—I know who the 'I' is who got here from there.

I know who's asking the question.

You might think I'd already know that, but no, no. I only discovered it as this latest episode developed.

I discovered that; then – more or less immediately – I discovered something else.

Something a wee bit scary...

—But I'm getting ahead of myself (as usual).

Back to this thing about stories.

...The day after my trip to Dundee, I sat down and wrote *The Way Home*, excited by the revelation of a second link to my mother and what it could mean for my search. (Might other things from my past – pictures, bric-a-brac, whatever – do the same sort of thing; push things forward?)

Getting it down was a bit of a struggle if I'm honest, but the effort showed me something I hadn't realised before: sometimes you don't know you know something until you try to put your feelings and impressions into words...

(Something I didn't twig to immediately, truth to tell, but did cotton on to a week later as I was reading the story over.)

...Suddenly came to me I'd been pulling out new thoughts (and old memories) rat-a-tat-tat while scribbling out my tale: that the very act of trying to write about my past had dragged things I'd lost track of out into the light of day...

Obvious enough when you think of it, I suppose, but it had me all of a buzz for a while...

Got me to wondering if finding ways of dredging up other half-forgotten things from my past and writing about them might help stimulate additional insights into that 'how I got here from there' question.

—Got some part of my jungle of a brain flapping about gamely like a newborn parrot, trying to squawk out a thought I suddenly had on something that might help me

remember the stuff that mattered...

\*

—My memory can be... well, ‘patchy’ is one way of saying it...

Since I’m often not paying attention to what’s going on around me, I sometimes can’t remember specifics and detail too well down along the way...

I’m much better on ‘janglers’ (as I sometimes call them): incidents or circumstances or facts that seem to ring a jangly bell hinting at unresolved questions or unfathomed depths hang around in here for a very long time...

—Until I tease out their secrets, in fact (and then, of course, they hang around forever).

Usually, they come with a feeling attached – an edgy or perplexed or anticipatory impression of what sort of thing lies hidden.

—And something always does, I find (lie hidden, I mean)... so I file them away and worry at them from time to time, hoping I’ll discover what it is somewhere along the way...

Anyway... that was the thought the flapping parrot in me eventually squawked out: that I might find those answers I’m so earnestly seeking by focusing on the questions, hunting for related memories with that jangly unfathomed feel, and attempting to write out a path to their

revelation – clickety clack clack clack.

Which is why you find me here a few weeks later on attempting to do just that...

(My other great wheezes – scanning through albums of old pics and staring dreamily at various vintage knick-knacks hoping for inspiration – having failed in the meantime...)

\*

The plan as I sat down to write was a simple list.

But it didn't quite go that way...

The warning feeling of something hidden wouldn't come jangling – and neither would the memories.

So I hit on a better notion – or the parrot did...

Thought she'd flapped off ages back, but no... Popped up again like an unfinished conversation as soon as I needed her...

Reminded me I once told my friend Geed that these *you're missing something here* warnings I'm talking about made me think of the three words you always find marked on wilderness areas of fantasy maps: words that seem to hint at mystery, danger, wild and exciting discoveries, all that stuff.

*Here be dragons...*

—Bloody parrot had me on a dragon hunt...

(A little fanciful, probably, but there you go – and maybe it will get the juices flowing, I thought, you never know...

—Sometimes if you frame the right context, things just pop into your noddle; do the business.)

\*

...It wasn't a dragon hunt as such, of course – not yet; just a hunt for 'places' where these dragons might be found.

I could find the dragons if I found the places the pesky parrot was telling me, and I could find the places by bringing to mind that jangly *here be dragons* impression I occasionally got that something in some particular set of circumstances *didn't quite sit right* and would maybe repay further investigation...

\*

—Can't say if it worked.

Maybe it did...

I eventually got there, I think, but I can't pretend it was according to plan, exactly...

Conjuring up the jangly feeling was definitely easier this time, but it wasn't bringing me anything of value...

Nothing was happening – no insights, no memories, nothing.



I sat staring at the screen of my laptop for an age trying for a whiff of dragon scent, but the trail, it seemed, had gone cold – if it had ever been warm in the first place.

...It was only when I did my usual – phased out and slipped into aimless reverie – that things began to move.

...Somewhere way, way downstream from where I'd started out, my original intentions all but forgotten, I suddenly realised I'd started daydreaming my way through a veritable dragon's hoard of the stuff I'd been hoping to find.

...Lazily mind-hopping my way from one gem to the next I was (leaving a fading trail of them behind me as I blundered on...) when I came to with a jump, twigged to what was happening, and started typing furiously on my re-awakened laptop.

... Got down as much as I could remember as fast as I could then – saved it all for future reference, imposing a reasonable amount of order on my hastily composed notes as I buzzed on along.

\*

...Won't rake over the details here – saving those and more for the thrilling flashbacks to come.

The rest of this ramble is not about unresolved janglers – it's about two things I did winkle out as I made my list of gems and e-scribbled them into some kind of

coherence...

The first was the identity of the 'I' that got here from there – I knew now who he was.

I called him Nineteen – which is what he called himself (or, to be strictly accurate, what I called myself when I was being him; taking his perspective on things).

His real age could actually be anything from 15 to 25 depending on the time of day, whether there was an 'r' in the month, and things like that – but Nineteen seems to hit it somehow.

...It was Nineteen who would say on my birthdays, and other situations where my age was raised (so to speak) that, of course, he still felt 19 inside.

...It was Nineteen, too, who couldn't look at us in mirrors any more.

And – yes – it was (I now saw) very definitely Nineteen who wanted to know how he'd got from there to here (by which he meant, how he could possibly have ended up as me).

I knew him well, one way and another. How he thought and felt, what he mostly wanted – and a lot more besides...

Nineteen was the part of me that got anxious about doing new things – but he was also the part of me that often

wanted to go ahead and do them anyway. (I was just the sometimes unfortunate result of ever letting that happen...)

In some important sense, he was the half-forgotten heart of me... (In fact, I often liked to think of him as the 'original me', although I have only the vaguest outline of a notion of what I mean by that.)

...Heart and head, sword and shield I suppose we are to each other – he, the have-a-go-hero (mostly), me the level-headed, stay-away-from-turmoil if I can man... (Both of us useful from time to time if I'm honest – except he doesn't much like to admit it, truth to tell.)

—Which brings me back to the second thing I discovered as I gave my memory gems a first pass cut and polish.

Old Nineteen – Mr Original – was iffy about the whole enterprise.

...The more we winkled our way into memories of the various episodes and what they might mean – and regardless of the edgy or perplexed or whatever feel that came with each individual gem – the more disinclined to go on he seemed to become.

Something inside him wanted answers; wanted to know how all his good intentions and romantic notions had ended up with me (did I mention he wasn't at all sure he was happy with me?) – but something else, something deeper, was singing a different song...

The words were unclear for the moment. But a vague

presentiment of threat and darkness, made sharp and keen by Nineteen's jitters, was doing the singing.

Somewhere inside him – somewhere inside me – was a whispering, flickering chant...

—I couldn't make it out, but I knew what it meant just the same...

Here...

Here...

Here be...

...

*dra*

## Throd and Doff

Obviously, I knew as well as Nineteen did what was making him edgy. Of course I did. How could I not?

Truth to tell, though, neither one of us had more than the vaguest, difficult to communicate, notion of what it was – just this feeling that if we went looking in certain places we might find what we were looking for, but might not like what we found...

We pushed on regardless, of course, heroes that we were; told ourselves the *here be dragons* ploy had given our impressions a negative tinge: that everything would be fine on the proverbial night.

...Just to be safe, though, we decided not to go looking anywhere too dangerous first off – best just to start with those stories that didn't give us an overly strong dose of the willies and work on forward from there was the thought I think...

—Which is why I'm now plunging headlong, sword arm at the ready, into the strange tale of Throd Drastik and his arch-nemesis Doffin.

It had very little to do with me on the face of it. I was merely an innocent bystander...

Well, as innocent as you can be if you keep mum in the presence of a clear injustice anyway...

It happened a long time ago – back when I was 13 and used to deliver milk in Broughty Ferry, a small seaside town near Douglas and Angus in Dundee...

Being ‘on the milk’ we called it and, truth to tell, I did seem to get through rather a lot of the stuff in those days – much of it ‘liberated’ (although that word, or that sense of it, only came into my vocabulary a few years further on).

...It’s mainly a story about Throd, co-worker and boy who didn’t exist, although I figure in it as well – as does the dastardly Doffin, our dingy boss (and unsuspected evil genius).

\*

He wasn’t anything you could remotely call likeable (Doffin, I mean); although he could be funny at times.

Even Throd used to laugh at his jokes – and he didn’t laugh much, probably because he was always being picked on or put down...

What Throd thought of Doffin is lost in the mists of we never really asked, but me and the other milk boys had a pretty low opinion of him...

(Richly deserved, I have to say – or that’s how I remember it, anyway...)

He was... sleazy, was my first thought... Only ‘sleazy’ seems to hint at a pretension to something better... and with Doff the Boff (as we called him) there wasn’t even that.

He always gave the impression he’d spent the night up some dark alley sodden drunk and had been wearing his tatty shirt and breeks for a month or more when he picked

us up in his lorry at 4.30 am.

...those stiff little part-grey hairs of stubble poking out of his chin...

...the tartan tie with food always on it: egg, or sauce, or whatever came along...

...that characteristic pong we all called ‘odour of Doff’. (As well as other, less polite things...)

‘Grubby’ is just about the size of it, I suppose.

Just some guy, really: trying to get by – and failing.

Not somebody you could respect...

Or look up to...

...Or would want to grow up to be.

—And, yes, Doffin was his real name, believe it or not.

We made up Throd Drastik, but Doffin’s name was none of our doing.

(Apart from the Boffin part, of course; that was all us...)

We took him for stupid as well as grubby, I think, so Doffin the Boffin was what he got.

...Until, that is, we discovered he was a bit smarter than we thought – or Throd did – one week in late February...

\*

February had been a pretty eventful month already, as it happens: a month when the much fabled ghosts of Long Lane had come to life...

(Can ghosts do that? Anyway, you know what I

mean... made their presence felt.)

Scared the living daylights out of me, it did – big time!

\*

The Lane was what it said it was – long.

I didn't cover all of it, but delivering to the end section was part of my round – the least favourite part, even before that morning.

I had to fill each of my two carriers with 12 or more pints, jump off the lorry at one end and run along in time to be picked up at the other, delivering milk to the houses of various customers along the way.

...It was winter, so most of our work was done in the dark.

By the time we were finishing up, thinking about breakfast and the bleak trudge to school, it was beginning to get light – but mostly we worked in the dark, under the moon and stars and the pale lamps of Broughty Ferry...

—And Long Lane was scary in the dark, even without the ghost stories my pals told me (which I'd never really believed, of course: we were always winding each other up).

I used to set my sights on the very end bit and try not to think about the first bit until I was past and it was over.

(All a bit desperate, I suppose, but it mostly worked.)



A series of old tenement buildings lined the right hand side of my patch.

They had four storeys, I think, and I often had to deliver milk to the very top.

...Didn't like this at the best of times, but it was even worse when – as often seemed to happen – all the lights in the close failed and I had to do it in what was edging on total darkness. (There were windows and street lights, so it wasn't quite total.)

...When that happened, it would last for days or longer and I would dread going down Long Lane even more than usual.

(As I said, the least favourite part of my round.)

...My trick was always not to think about anything other than getting the job done till it was over.

I'd rush up to whatever landings had customers, deliver my milk, pick up the empties and hurtle back down again as fast as I could.

...A difficult trick to manage, all in all: seeing just enough of the stairwell to navigate up and down it at a desperate run but not enough of the dark nooks and shadows to make out anything that might be lurking in the black, thirsting for the lifeblood of tender young terrified milk boys...

(Yes, and coming down again was worse, somehow... Who knows what new horrors might be stirring in the gloomy, waiting to block my frantic downwards dash, drive me back to the far corner of the upper dark?)

—And Long Lane had something worse on offer than a series of dark stairwells; that's the thing.

Sitting across from the tenements, running down the left hand side of the lane for a lot longer than I would have liked, was an old graveyard with a spooky looking shadowy church looming behind it...

Keeping my eyes firmly fixed in front of me as I moved along from building to building dumping my milk was hard enough – but getting out of a dark close I was fleeing from without inadvertently casting my eyes over into the cemetery and its array of mossy old tombs was close to impossible...

There was no high wall blocking your view, just a low dyke affair you could easily see over.

—Except that I always had to make sure that I didn't. If I looked in at the grim higgledy-piggledy lines of deathly stones, maybe peered ill-advisedly into the shadows they cast, I'd be sure to see a pale hungry face leering back out at me with evil intent – or something black and malformed lurching towards me out of the mist, its grasping, claw-like hands, grubbing for my fleshy-white delicate throat...

There would be no hope of escape then. If I saw it, it would – I somehow knew – also have seen me. I'd have to run, and it would have to do whatever black and malformed grubbers do and visit some macabre retribution for my hapless attempts to avoid the inevitable...

—Yes, and that was on a good day: this wasn't one of those...

Not even close...

We'd all been telling each other ghost stories, you see – especially Jak, who'd scared me witless with a tale about 'no-eyes Ettie', who apparently chased you on her pogo stick and wanted to kiss you dead so you had to stay and play 'housies' with her.

...Blood-curdling thought, even now.

—Not nearly as terrifying as what happened that morning though...

No, I didn't see Ettie – though I'm sure she was blindly pushing her cold, withering lips against mine somewhere at the back of my fevered brain...

I didn't see anything at all – and that was part of the trouble.

Maybe if I could have put a face (so to speak) on the sounds I was hearing, it would have been less petrifying.

—Or maybe not, eh?

Maybe not...

I was three or four doors from the end of the tenements when it happened...

Had finished my deliveries and was starting to feel safe...

Couldn't believe I was hearing it at first – tried to tell myself it was just my imagination...

Wasn't though – the terrifying sound was real.

The graveyard – all of it – was wheezing at me...

Felt my knees go weak then – could hardly stand, let alone run...

...Was so freaked I did what I would never have done ordinarily and actually looked into the cemetery to try and identify the source.

...Nothing.

—Well, shadows and tombs and branches and such, but nothing to explain the sound, which was now getting louder, turning first into a long drawn out wail and then into a sort of throaty screaming that finally got my pegs pumping.

Ran as though all the yappers of the deepest hell were snapping at my dangles.

—Was a bag of nerves in Long Lane for weeks afterwards (though I never heard those awful sounds again).

\*

(None of which has anything whatever to do with Throd and the Doff – other than the fact that it happened the same week – on the Wednesday to be precise.)

This was Saturday, though, and I was beginning to get my act back on track as far as Long Lane was concerned (although, as I said, it took weeks to settle down completely).

I'd convinced myself (well, nearly) that it all must have been a train braking suddenly, making some kind of emergency stop...

Somewhere just beyond the spooky old church, there was a very ordinary railway line, and not too far away there was also a station and a level crossing...

I was a believer, not in ghosts, but in science: there had to be a rational explanation and that had to be it...

The noise lasted for what seemed an age and there were no other sounds to indicate either an emergency or a train (it would have been pulled by a steam engine, so I'd have expected to hear steam engine type sounds – chugging, steam whistles, that sort of thing), but still, I thought, there was a railway and trains went along it and the crossing and the station might have required some kind of emergency stop...

—Made sense.

... Almost.

—I was convinced.

...Nearly.

Anyway, it helped me in my frenzied dash along Long Lane – or started to. I was calming down a bit – about the wheezing and screaming at any rate...

\*

Saturdays were different, in any case.

Aside from anything else, there was no school on Saturday, so that was a big plus right there.

...Wasn't just that, though: on Saturdays, once the round was over, we got paid, stopped at Visoki's cafe for filled rolls and Fanta, and generally had a laugh on the way home.

(A favourite 'lark' was screaming 'Hey, mister, yir back wheel's goin' roon!' at cyclists we passed on the lorry, aiming to freak them out – didn't usually work, of course, but we thought it was hilarious...)

Point is, by that next Saturday, even Long Lane was looking less nerve-racking. (Although I guess another bout of wheezing and such would still have put the fear of whatever into me, *toot sweetie*.)

—Didn't happen, fortunately, but something else did: the dastardly Doffin was about to scare the lot of us in an entirely different way...

Once the round was over, he got the four of us into the

cab of the lorry as usual to hand out our pay.

—Well, we thought it was as usual, but it turned out it wasn't...

Oh, we got paid all right – even Throd got paid...

Not before the Boff had sprung his nasty little surprise, though...

It all seemed innocent enough, first off.

He had a complicated sum he was trying to do – had a pencil and paper and everything and was scribbling away furiously...

Asked us to help him and rattled off the details, quick as a kick...

Most of us were too traumatised by the numbers to do anything much – mental arithmetic on a Saturday morning – ugh!

Throd leapt in all brains blazing, though...

Before the Boff had even finished scribbling, he'd shouted out the answer (guess he just wanted to be top dog at something, eh?).

Big mistake...

In a matter of seconds he was back down to earth with a bang, his ego crushed, victory turned to defeat.

—Don't think Doffin even knew whether Throd's answer was right or not: that, it seemed, hadn't been the

point...

It was a trap and Throd fell right in, ensnared by his own cleverness...

As the Boff put it, he knew one of us had been 'schemying' (sneaking extra milk off the lorry, selling it to customers, and keeping some of the money they paid at the end of every week for himself), and now he knew who.

Anyone who could count better and faster than the boss was far too clever by half...

Throd was gone, over and out, sacked – and, yes, the rest of us had better watch their steps as well.

(Seems Doffin was a boffin after all, sleekit auld goat.)

—Don't think he was out to get Throd particularly; any one of us would have done just as well...

Just wanted to make an example of somebody and make the rest of us wary of him and what he might do. (Worked, too – for a while anyway...)

It was the end for old TD, though. None of us defended him – even though we all knew that, if there was any one of us who wasn't 'schemying' it was probably Throd.

He slipped off that day without talking to any of us and we never saw him again.

...I'd more or less forgotten him completely, actually



— until, that is, his (pretend) name turned up with a *here be dragons* tag on it, hinting that there was something somewhere in this part of my past that had a bearing on my current concerns.

...Didn't know what it was at first.

...Had written almost the whole story without getting even a hint of why it had a tinge of dragon scent hovering at the back, thinking maybe it was the train thing.

...Was only as I wrote 'none of us defended him' that the parrot squawked for me.

...That was when I remembered something else about Throd: he didn't defend himself either; didn't say anything, or look at anyone, just accepted his fate and slipped away quietly in shame and humiliation.

Even if he was guilty (which I doubt), Doffin's test was hardly proof. His verdict was dubious, at best.

Throd was treated in a completely unjust way and he didn't even protest: not a whisper, not even a whimper in fact. Nothing. Nada. Zilch.

—Doffin, though, was sure he'd been incredibly clever; really smart.

At the very least, he was partly in the wrong, but he was in no doubt whatever that the opposite was true.

...So incredibly sure, in fact, that it never even crossed his mind to do anything but congratulate himself on his triumph.

...Throd, on the other hand, was at least partly, and probably wholly, in the right – innocent at best, and damned by an unfair test at worst.

He behaved as if he wasn't, though – took what was dished out and just crept away as though he felt he deserved it...

Whereas the Boff was so full of himself there was no room left for doubt, Throd was the opposite: an empty shell, holed below the waterline before he even set sail.

...This, I think, was why we never called him by his real name, always by the – deliberately disparaging – fake name, Throd Drastik.

(Or, at least, it was why he put up with it – which is why we kept doing it)...

There was nobody much in there underneath it all.

—Or, if there was, he was cowering in some corner somewhere hoping no one would notice him...

\*

It was also – I now recognised, with a growing sense of unease – why his story was on my list of tales that simultaneously drew me in and warned me off.

...It reminded me that, somewhere at the core of who I am, is a part – an important part – that Nineteen thinks of as 'broken' and I try not to think of at all: a part that is more Throd than Doff the Boff.

I found it hard to find words for it at first, but I

persevered and finally came up with a Mr Nineteen attempt that is at least a first approximation to the truth.

—What it boils down to is this. Old boy Nineteen – Mr Original Me, remember? – doesn't believe I'm real.

—Worse than that, he doesn't believe either of us is.

## Moves Within

*In which our hero maligns snakes, learns from a late but laudable lady, and challenges God's representative on Earth, edging closer to the heart of his me me me maze in the process...*

*Heading for transcendence like a pooch sniffing lamposts is – so you'll probably have to be more than a little patient with the half-calamitous gesundheit.*

*Still, no need to worry on that account with you, eh? Razor-keen insight and tolerance all the way to the bank, I bet...*

*Temperance, charity, diligence, courage, humility, and chastity falloloping along behind, probably...*

**Tuten Leswan**

## Nest of Teachers

I couldn't even begin to tell you why, but I don't much like snakes.

Even though I've only ever encountered two actual snakes in my whole life and they were both tiny wee baby things: a small brown adder that reared up (almost as high as my ankle) to threaten me when I nearly stood on it during a walk with Bee somewhere in Galloway and some kind of water snake that had to be fished out of our holiday pool with a net once in Florida...

—Neither one was any kind of threat – not really.

Either could easily have slept, curled up, in the palm of my hand.

...Assuming I'd ever let it do such a thing, of course, which I wouldn't (no way!).

There's a picture of Rio somewhere with a boa (I think it's a boa) wrapped round her neck and down along her arms – guess it should reassure me.

Doesn't, though.

No chance I'd ever let any one of them anywhere near me.

—Urrggh! Never! Nasty, horrible, dangerous critters!

The stuff of nightmares, in fact: literally, in my case. The worst nightmare I ever had was one Christmas

morning, when I woke up in the dark (or thought I did) to find the whole room alive with the things...

The curtains seemed to be made of them, wriggling and slithering and twisting sinuously round and over and through each other – every one a different shape, colour and length and all with scary markings and (probably) poisonous fangs. Every one (I was sure) determined to get at me and bite me or squeeze me to death and swallow me...

I was – no exaggeration, I swear – frozen with fear: in a cold sweat; unable to move; terrified of attracting their attention in case one should break away from the curtains (or the walls – they were near enough all round me by now) and take it into its forked tongue to come get me.

Only when one of them did exactly that – dropped with a thud (I can still feel the thump as it hit my bed!) and began to glide silently up over the blankets towards me – was the spell broken.

Did the only thing I could think of then – grabbed the biggest present from the bottom of my bed (Christmas morning, remember?) and fell back covering my head with it.

...Next thing I knew I was waking up on Christmas day with it still over my noddle – a huge, cube-shaped, box wrapped in brown paper and tied with string.

...Turned out to be a cowboy suit, as it happens, complete with a six-gun for shooting ‘injuns’ and ‘baddies’

and – yup! – rattlesnakes.

Howdy, pardner!

\*

...You're probably wondering why I'm telling you all this, but it's no great mystery really: I want you to be in no doubt about how I feel towards the particular group of worthies at the core of this story (them too if they are still around to remember and should happen to read this and recognise themselves).

The expression 'nest of vipers' is used to describe something vile and hateful. Usually, it's used to describe people felt to have these fine qualities.

As should be obvious by now, the term has a particular resonance for me.

So when I talk here about a nest of teachers you'll understand I'm not handing out compliments...

In fact, I might even go so far as to say I'm maligning snakes...

As I may have hinted at above, I have a pretty low opinion of snakes, but I hope for more of teachers – and this bunch failed me utterly in the high expectations department (and then some)...

'Despicable' is a word that comes to mind – but, no, there's a better one.

When I told this story once to my friend Geed, getting more and more heated as I relived the key moments, we both simultaneously punctuated the tale by (literally, I think) spitting out the word that seems to sum them up best:

'Bastards!'

...I'll come to the shitty thing they did in a bit.

First, though, I need to explain some other things – starting with that stuff about not being real...

\*

Oh, yes, I can guess what you're thinking... Doesn't think he's real (or, worse, thinks he's someone else who doesn't think either of them is real) – mad as a hatter! Something like that, right?

But it's just a way of speaking: a way of trying to put something difficult to explain into words: of expressing a difficult to communicate feeling...

It's not like when you say you don't believe in God or Satan or something like that – I'm not saying Nineteen and I don't believe we physically exist (or that we do believe we don't).

It's more of a lack of... well, self-assuredness I suppose – a feeling that there's not actually anyone reliable inside the physical me running things; that there's no one coherent in charge: no one safe, anyway.

...Except that isn't quite right either...

Seems to suggest I'm having a verbal tussle with myself about whether or not there's a 'me' in here – but that's not it.

It's more deep-rooted than that and almost



subconscious...

Not some words in my head thinking this stuff, but an all pervasive bottomless pit of an empty, rudderless feeling that while it persists *is* what I am (and all that I am).

...It's like I'm not really up to whatever it is I'm trying to do because something inside me is broken and can't be fixed, no matter what.

...A feeling that I'm just pretending, acting out a role.

...That I can't succeed at whatever I'm trying to do because I'm not really who I claim to be – and am bound to get found out for the imposter (failed imposter) that I am.

\*

It's only an occasional thing – I should make that clear... Most of the time I'm hunky-d.

—And it's a lot less common than it used to be – which is why it took Nineteen's perspective to remind me of it during the last story.

It's still there, though, and still rears its ugly head at moments of crisis (and at some other less obvious times too).

It's just (I suppose) that over the years I've developed better ways of dealing with it...

Learning to pretend it's not happening in the main and thrusting on regardless, steadfast stalwart that I am.

—And pushing it out of my head once a particular

episode ends; that too: the good old head in the sand strategy.

When it does happen, though, it just happens; it isn't predictable... I might be doing something I've done before quite happily and I'm suddenly floundering...

But equally there can be times when I have reason to fear it will happen and it doesn't.

...It's usually when I'm facing something difficult, but not always – I can just be talking to a friend about nothing much at all and the inner me takes a sudden lurch into foreboding and darkness and I'm suddenly totally hopeless...

...I'd call it a sinking feeling but that is way too mild for the sickening crunch of it.

It's as though I reach some limit of my capabilities and can't go on because in some fundamental sense something inside me is broken.

—And can't be fixed, I keep coming back to that.  
Can't be fixed...

\*

I should get on with the story, though – except.

...Yes, I'd better tell you...

Something odd has happened since I first waded in...  
Those old jitters – Nineteen's, mine – have gone,

dissipated, vanished.

Suggesting (I guess) that maybe there's nothing dragonish lurking in here after all...

It had seemed possible first off that what those vipers did that day – a public indication that they didn't think I was up to the particular task in hand – might be at the root of my affliction.

...Or anyway that it might be a prime example of the sort of thing that caused it – maybe even the proverbial straw that broke the dromedary's back.

I've changed my mind, though...

Something made me veer off otherwise.

Not exactly sure what.

...Might have been mulling over the fact that I did what they thought I couldn't anyway – after a fashion at least.

...Or the feeling I had as I looked at my notes that the teacher thing was all too external somehow; that the heart of the problem wasn't something out there but way down deep inside somewhere.

...Or maybe it was realising that other people's doubts about me weren't enough to explain things – something that occurred to me when I started thinking ahead to the next story, whose main character was living proof that you can be positive about yourself even if no one else is – and even if you maybe have every reason to think they have it right.

—Yes, and back too to Doff (who had self-belief in

spades for no good reason I could see).

I'm not really sure is the truth of it: the jittery *here be dragons* feeling that I was heading somewhere I needed to go but would rather not simply slipped out down the back stairs and shuffled off into the night...

\*

You'll be glad to know, though – or, maybe you will – that there is still a point to telling the rest of this story (besides the fact that it'd be a bit stupid to start a story and not finish it).

...For one thing, even though I'm now fairly sure it isn't the root cause of my little problem, its pathetic climax comes as close as I'm willing to get to describing what one of these disasters feels like (actual examples being mental and emotional no-go areas I would never willingly visit).

For another, to put it simply, those 'bastards' deserve a really good kicking for what they did and I'm planning to make sure they get it.

\*

Let's begin by being a little fair to them, though: there was a context that maybe they didn't know about (then again, maybe they should have; no?).

But, no, maybe not.

They couldn't have known the difficulty I had at the time with my shoes and football, for example.

Or how shabby I was feeling that day because of it...

I was particularly hard on shoes, is the thing.

I always seemed to damage them, with the common problem being the uppers coming away from the soles at the front.

I was told it was playing football in the playground that did it and ordered to stop.

...I couldn't stop though, so I kept doing it – damaging my shoes I mean – a big problem because, when it happened, I was usually scared to admit I needed new shoes again when I got home but embarrassed to go into school like that.

...So I used to try to glue them back down – not a great solution, really, but it put off the evil day.

...I was always sure that the other kids could see I'd done it, though...

In fact, they almost certainly could – the glue always showed and you couldn't polish it invisible (I tried – pretty much every time).

—Plus, sooner or later, the repair would suddenly fail: usually (but not always) when I was playing football...

Point is, I was never quite on form when my shoes had been freshly glued – and they had that day, so I wasn't in great shape even before those teachers got to me. (Sounds stupid, but it's hard to be brimful of confidence when you can't even trust the shoes you're wearing.)

...Plus, I wasn't exactly full of the stuff anyway at that age, even at the best of times.

—Unsure of myself, confused about what was expected of me; beset on all sides, it sometimes seemed, by people who judged me instantly and, often as not, found me wanting, that was me...

...A permanently anxious little boy lost type – forever taking refuge in the imaginary worlds he visited through books and comics and general fantasising.

A dreamer who already knew that you weren't meant to do that.

Dream, I mean.

That would fit into the category of 'getting above yourself', something you didn't do – ever.

Or, if you did, there were plenty of folk around who'd make sure you'd regret it: cut you down to size with a hard slap, a sarcastic comment, or a punch – whatever it took. (Seemed that way to me, anyway.)

I know lots of people from my kind of neck of the woods will speak in glowing terms about the support and encouragement they got from everyone around them when they were growing up or trying to better themselves or whatever – but I'm willing to bet there are at least as many like me who got clawed down every time they were foolish enough to raise their unworthy heads above the parapet.

...My no doubt irritating tendency to make a bad joke or self-deprecating remark whenever I think I might be getting too fanciful, or too serious, or too smart-arsed

almost certainly dates from then, I think...

(Put yourself down before somebody else does was a trick I learned early.)

—Wasn't just me, of course. Everyone got their fair share of it.

The whole 'community' (as we'd call it now) seemed hell-bent on making sure no one got above themselves...

It was just that I was the only one of those on the receiving end I really cared about (sob!).

Poor little mite.

—Even the teachers (now I come to think of it) seemed to be in on it...

The English teacher (with the strange middle parting we all mocked as a 'Cecil cut') who praised my essay on *Macbeth* to the class then mortified me by following this up with a cruelly sarcastic put-down of one of the other guys in the class.

Did he know what would happen in the playground afterwards?

Was that why he did it?

And the Art Teacher who stood behind me for ages as I put my heart and soul into painting a landscape I'd dreamt about once (a wild, wind-swept tree on top of a hill) – only to make a disparaging remark about my efforts at the end, loudly enough for everyone around me to hear: my first and for many years last real attempt at producing 'art' downed in aoner...

—Credit where credit's due, though: he isn't one of the viperous crew I'm aiming to immortalise here momentarily – in fact, his efforts pale into insignificance at the merest hint of a comparison.

\*

It all began at a weekly school assembly: in that awful hall lined with white tiles and dark wood with the staircase at the end of it that had a lectern on the landing – the spot where our less than beloved Rector, 'Jimmy the Git', bored us regularly with good advice, monologues on bad behaviour, the importance of school successes at 'sports', and various bits of drivel about God and Jesus and what have you...

Usually, I was half asleep as he rambled on, but this particular morning something in his voice got through to me and made me listen. (He was, I suspect, always trying to inspire us all to great things, but this time, in my case at least, he actually succeeded in being inspirational...)

I could suddenly see my future mapped out before me, bright with meaning and glory (ha!).

I would join the ranks of the great men and women of the world: the artists, the philosophers, the scientists – Leonardo, Curie, Beauvoir, Plato, Fleming, Galileo...

A future of promise and achievement – yes, that would be me...

I would go to university...

—Which is why, less than a week later, I found myself in the same hated (but now empty) hall, heading for



the room where a meeting for pupils who thought they might want to apply to one or more of these august institutions was being held (this was before our Highers year, I think – or maybe even ‘O’ levels).

I remember my steps echoing as I crossed the wooden floor. ...And feeling exposed, as though I had no right to be there (and was frightened that someone would spot me and stop me).

—Yes, and the door being closed when I got to it...  
I hadn’t expected that and it really threw me.

My stomach lurched earthwards – I even considered walking nonchalantly past as though I wasn’t really interested after all (wouldn’t be the first time I’d done that, or the last).

...Probably would have too – if I hadn’t realised I couldn’t. I’d told too many people I was going – in particular, I’d told my dad, who’d been particularly pleased and encouraging about the whole thing...

So I didn’t – I knocked on the door (you weren’t ever supposed to walk into a room without knocking on pain of God knows what).

...No answer...

Knocked again.

...Still nothing...

...Started to turn away, ready to flee...

...Then heard someone inside say in an irritated voice (quite loudly, as though they'd said it before and were having to repeat themselves),

'Come in!'

I went in...

Headed for an empty seat I could see half way down the front row (trying not to look at the sea of faces or the three teachers standing in a huddle at the front).

...And that was when they did it.

All three of the teachers looked round to see who'd come in.

Looked round and let their surprise at seeing me show on their faces.

—Worse, one of them actually uttered the words 'What are you doing here?' (Maybe those weren't the exact words, but that was the gist of it.)

...Stuttered an explanation at her, kept heading for that seat...

... Only to feel one of my repaired shoes 'give' as I walked, so that the upper started flapping...

...Kept keeping on, though – told myself nobody

could hear or see it.

...Tripped over my shoelaces on the way – had to be helped into my seat by Rugi, this girl I had a hopeless crush on back then...

Mortified doesn't even begin to cover it.  
Total red-faced shame and embarrassment – enough to last me a life-time.

...Give me something close to that (failed) imposter feeling about university (for a while, at least).

*Utterly. Bloody. Awful...*

\*

—And, yes, I do know what you're thinking.

These things happen, right?

...The teachers probably didn't mean to do it. (No, but it was an honest reflection on how they saw me.)

...Probably, they did their best to make up for it afterwards. (Yes, I guess, if I'm truthful, they did.)

...I should be more understanding.

...I shouldn't be harbouring all this resentment decades later.

I should forgive them.

—Well then, okay – *okay!*

I forgive them.

...Bastards!

## The Late Show

Referring to someone's funeral as 'The Late Show' sounds a bit irreverent I suppose, but it isn't intended to be here.

Now that I know her better, I feel certain Lissie would understand.

...She was, after all, the person responsible for turning it into a 'show' in the first place – at least that's what I believe.

I'd better try to explain – before I become completely incoherent...

Thankfully, just telling the story of the funeral will do it – though it's more about me than the funeral.

(As usual...)

\*

I realise now I never really knew Lissie – never really saw her...

Not many people in my life I would admit to learning much from and while she was alive Lissie wasn't amongst them (my fault, I now realise).

Ultimately, though, she reached out from beyond the veil (as they say) and showed me stuff – some of it at the time of the funeral or just after; some of it later when I was

plotting out these tales.

...She even – in the car back to the station after the show – won an argument with me I never knew we'd had.  
...About – well, never mind, we'll get to it later.  
Best if I stick to the funeral for now.

I forget precisely where it was held. Unless I'm paying attention – and usually I'm not – I'm hopeless at that kind of detail.

It was in Dundee; I remember that much, and – as befits a funeral I suppose – it was raining.  
Pouring, in fact...

I have a clear picture of myself standing in the grounds of the crematorium with a small huddle of other people, sheltering from Glasgow-like black rain under inadequate umbrellas.

Watching long cars arrive carrying people I didn't know.

People with sorry faces.

It's the last clear picture I have of the location – or the people, for that matter...

After that I drifted off to wherever my wandering brain goes when it loses interest in what's going on (which is often) and stayed there till Lissie woke me up half-way through the service: got my attention for the first time in her life.

...Lucky her.

...I don't remember a whole lot about going in, sitting down, hearing the first words, any of that...

I do recall looking a couple of times early on at the marble block where Lissie herself lay and thinking it... I don't know – wrong, unfortunate, depressing – that the room looked so functional.

Aside from that, I was more or less off in my usual state, day-dreaming about God knows what. (I don't remember that either.)

Oh, I would get up and sing the hymns, bow my head for the prayers, that sort of thing, but I was only barely present most of the time: listening and going through the motions but not quite there if you know what I mean...

—Something was happening, though: seeping into my consciousness somehow.

Percolating up towards the light of day as I sat and stood there...

I like to think of it now as Lissie whispering in my ear, but I don't mean it literally; I didn't hear anything except the service droning on...

But I was taking in something, just the same.

A sketch of sorts that didn't quite make sense yet, but was beginning to – each stroke filling out a picture of the lady in the polished wooden casket in the centre of the room (the 'poor soul' as someone had called her as we

were shuffled through the door of the remembrance chapel).

—Except, it wasn't a sketch yet, not quite: not there and then...

Not until after Lissie applied what for me was the final stroke of her brush and rounded off her Late Show with a favourite song: a pop hit that was a bit before my time, but not so much before that I didn't recognise it and like it, and know some of the words...

I've forgotten what it was now, but that's not the point.

What matters is what it did, not what it was.

It caught my attention, woke me up a bit: brought the picture forming in my sub-conscious into full focus...

A picture of the person whose life we'd come to mark and celebrate...

A picture of Lissie herself.

...A picture that portrayed someone that didn't seem in the least bit like the lady I thought I knew – and that I was immediately certain was a self-portrait (don't ask me how, but I was – and people do plan their own funerals, so it seemed credible and still does).

I was fully awake now. This was interesting...

Not just because I'd learned something personally (not judging a book by its cover is somewhere in the right



ballpark), but because Lissie herself was suddenly that too. Interesting, I mean...

She wasn't this 'poor soul' in a wheelchair as I'd stupidly thought till now – a badly disabled old lady, wearing callipers and with a twisted body she could barely control (and who had great difficulty getting idiots like me to understand what she was saying).

That was the Lissie my limited and inattentive brain had seen, but it wasn't who she was – and it wasn't how she wanted to be remembered.

Inside that shell, she was this clear-eyed girl, bright and optimistic; a lady with no illusions (who knew very well how some of us had seen her and was showing us now we were wrong), but with a keen wit and intelligence, a determined take on the positives of existence, and lots more going for her besides...

Someone with hopes and dreams and a fierce grip on the essentials of life: that was the real Lissie...

She'd just told me so herself.

\*

I stayed awake then for the rest of the service. Not that there was much of it to go, but still, I was there – paying attention I mean – till Lissie took her final curtsy.

I remember hoping, as we prepared for her departure, that they wouldn't do that chilling trick they pulled at Dad's funeral (tell you later – maybe) – then it was over

and we were shuffling off through the doors.

(Out to the rain, the dismal sky and the bleak black cars...)

There was a bit of the usual chatter as we hovered about, but there wasn't much to say and we were soon all heading our separate ways.

...I think I might have tried to tell a couple of people I'd had this revelation about Lissie and her Late Show and just got blank looks, but I'm used to that... (We have more in common than I'd realised, Liss!)

(Maybe a lot more...)

\*

That wasn't the end of it, though. Lissie hadn't quite finished with me yet. She had one more thing to say...

It happened on the train back to Glasgow.

I couldn't settle to my book, so I was soon drifting off again and – almost before I knew it (by which I mean it seemed to begin more or less immediately) – I was back at Lissie's 80th birthday party having a bit of an argument with some old guy who was letting his prejudices show (drink talking, I suspect).

I don't remember exactly what he said, but it was something about stupid politicians letting foreigners into the country and the world going to pot – that sort of thing.

Normally, I'd just have put on a superior smile and

ignored him, but that wasn't possible this time. He was talking to me directly with that tone people use sometimes that somehow manages to presuppose your undiluted agreement...

I had to say something, so I did: a cutting mutter to the effect that what was really stupid was judging people on the basis of trivial differences like their nationality or the colour of their skin.

—Could well have blown up into a full-scale argument had Lissie herself not intervened at that point and said something I couldn't and (in all honesty didn't try to) understand...

I could rarely make out what she was saying to me at any given time and had developed a habit of mostly just nodding and smiling and pretending to agree (treating her as though she were stupid, in other words).

...Might not have remembered the incident at all but it stuck in my mind (and came back now) because she had given me a look and punctuated her words with my name in a way that seemed to say both that she was agreeing with me and that she was making a point against me...

It had puzzled me at the time, but not any more: the action replay made everything clear.

This time I was trying to make out her words and I did:

'Or on how they look and sound, Dennis,' she said, and gave me that look.

A look that said (I now realised) 'yes, you're right,

but you're not so smart yourself sometimes. I'm not who you think I am – and the problem is with you, not me.'

—Well, something like that.

At the time I'd just dismissed the incident (and Lissie herself, to be truthful), but this time (action replay, remember?), I had to concede: she'd won her point – some several years after the fact.

\*

I'd forgotten Lissie after that all in all, but she taught me something important that day – with her Late Show I mean (and what happened afterwards)...

Thinking about it now as I try to feel my way towards an appropriate ending for this particular yarn, I'm not surprised it turned up with a *here be dragons* tag on it. It would appear to have a lot to say about this journey I seem to be on and where it might end, although I'm not sure I'm able yet to put any of it into a coherent form of words...

There are so many threads, for one thing, but that's not the only problem: some of them are really just formless hints rather than clear and conclusive thoughts.

I have a feeling they'll lead in time to concrete discoveries, but it's no more than that.

...And some are segueing out into stuff leaking in from stories we've not reached yet; could get confusing, if I'm not careful.

...A jumble of half-formed ideas is all they amount to anyway. Maybe they'll lead somewhere eventually, but they don't at the moment... Not yet.

...Stuff about imagination and belief, in the main – how fantasies can become real if we let them and that's probably good sometimes.

...As long as we don't go too far with our believing of it.

...How our selves form and change – and fail.

...How a complex cocktail of who we imagine ourselves to be, or would like to be, how firmly we believe it, how others see us and react to us, our place in the world, and yes, how we see others and the world generally, makes us who we are.

My behaviour towards Lissie – just like those teachers' behaviour towards me – was down to a failure of imagination.

I couldn't see the real Lissie, and that changed who I was when I was dealing with her – made me something less; no better than my favourite teachers...

She, on the other hand, could look in her mirror – and, yes, in the distorting mirrors that some of us provided for her – and still see herself as something better: as someone special...

—We don't have to be who other people think we are is the point, I think.

...My 'not real' feeling probably didn't come from

those teachers – or from or from anyone else in my life back then.

There was – had to be – some other reason I sometimes felt like an imposter in my own skin...

(A little later on I'm going to consider the possibility the wound might have been self-inflicted, but I don't want to go there yet – still feeling my way forward, step by little step.)

\*

Anyway, that's the story of Lissie and her Late Show – as much of it as I know, at least.

I know it's done because, all of a sudden, my mind has gone quiet on me – so quiet, in fact, you could hear a parrot squawk...

Time to move on I think, before it does; this particular ramble has gone on long enough.

Goodbye, Lissie dear. Sorry I missed you...

## Purple People Eater

I'm back at school for this episode. A bit later than the Nest of Teachers fiasco I think, but Polly is decidedly dubious – and she could be right, I'm not totally certain...

—A good bit later anyway than the song by Sheb Wooley about 'a one-eyed, one-horned, flyin' purple people eater' that gives the story its name.

This, I was reliably informed by the good old Internet a few minutes before starting to write, spent six weeks at No. 1 in 1958, at which time I was only seven years old.

I probably heard it on our 'radiogram' at home around that time and had almost certainly forgotten it entirely when the story happened some 7 or 8 years later. (As I said, I'm a bit vague about the exact date.)

...It had nothing to do with what happened that day; not back then anyway.

'So what's the link?' I hear you ask.

Just this: it's a song with a twist. You start off thinking it's about a people eater that's purple and might eat the singer (who, naturally enough, is having a conversation with it), but it turns out to be a beastie that only eats *purple* people and has in any case only turned up on the planet to join a rock 'n roll band. So old Sheb is really quite safe after all – phew!

Which is neither here nor there, really; the point is

that the beastie ate purple people and this is a story about how I myself ate a purple person – had him for breakfast as we used to say in the playground when we felt we’d wiped the opposition off the proverbial map.

\*

I should explain, I suppose, that this particular purple person didn’t start out purple – that was my doing.

Started out black and white, as a matter of fact – a pasty-faced Church of Scotland minister in a black robe and white dog-collar get-up who turned up in class one day.

What class, I don’t remember – but I do remember it was unusual...

Teachers taught us: we never had anyone else; then suddenly we’re getting told that this religious chappie is taking us for a full period?

...Boring, probably, was our immediate reaction, but that wasn’t the worse part.

We couldn’t believe what we were hearing – or anyway what I knew to be a fairly large group of us couldn’t.

A minister? All that Jesus and life everlasting stuff?

It was an insult.

—Or a joke.

Religion was the past: *science* was the future.

We knew what side we were on: wouldn’t be seen dead with the God squad.



...You could say he'd lost us before he started, but that isn't quite true.

Lasted a couple of minutes longer than that: only finally brought low by a killing blow to the heart – courtesy of yours truly – a couple of sentences into his session.

...Well, okay, maybe not quite 'a killing blow', but a mortal wound that totally undermined what little credibility he had.

Left him a blubbering, purple-faced, blustering old nobody we couldn't take seriously.

...Made me a hero.

—Well, sort of...

(With a few of my friends, anyway...

—For a couple of minutes...)

—Except, that's not really the point. The point is he put me on the spot, and I rose to the occasion.

...Even though I was scared.

...Even though I never spoke up in class normally unless forced to.

...Even though he took me by surprise.

—He took me on, and I bested him: mainly because (I now think – didn't even consider it at the time) deep down I had more belief in my (scientific) view of things than he had in his God squad view.

(Don't ask me why that should be so – his problem, not mine – but then, at that point in time, in those circumstances, it was true.)

Well, I think it was – or the parrot does. I was more

effective than he was because I believed more totally than he did – at that instant, at least.

(And it was as much about how I saw the world as it was about how I saw myself and that seems to be telling me something relevant to my current concerns, although I can't quite put my finger on what.)

...It's not just how we see ourselves but how we see the world and ourselves in it – and whether or not there is a chink in the armour of our belief; something like that I guess.

Except that 'belief seems – I don't know – not absolute enough for what I had there, that day, for a few seconds...

A complete lack of doubt might be better.

...Only that seems to imply somehow that I considered doubt and made an intellectual decision to discard it, and that definitely wasn't it.

...It was more like doubt didn't enter into the equation at all – that there was no mental or emotional or any other kind of room for it.

As though – at that point in time – the certainty that squeezed it out *was* me. No ifs, buts or maybes.

\*

Don't get me wrong, it wasn't really like that when he first

challenged me – only a few seconds later at the point of the telling thrust.

At first I was nervous as hell, horrified at being put on the spot, tongue-tied, the whole works...

Then the self-belief thing kicked in, and the rest is history...

Here's what happened:

He'd obviously come knowing there would be a whole load of doubters amongst us and had decided to meet the problem head-on.

Pitched right in with 'Hands up anyone here who doesn't believe in God' – at which point at least half the class put their hands up, myself amongst them (albeit a little reluctant at putting myself in the spotlight).

He was ready for us, though. Or thought he was. Beat one and beat them all was the tactic. Pointed straight at me and said,

'Why not?'

I won't lie: my first reaction was total panic – and I do mean *total*.

I couldn't let it win, though, and I didn't. I fought back, or rather the crusader for science I imagined I was did.

This was war. I was 'it'. My friends were all watching.

I had to react, and I did: said the first thing that came into my head.

The simple truth as it happens:

'I can't see any reason to.'

Not so fantastic a thrust you might think, but the effect was dramatic.

Mr Minister turned bright red, then purple, then – literally – incoherent with rage; ranted on for several minutes about flowers and beauty and the wonders of the stars and planets and what have you...

—Recovered himself fairly quickly, of course.

Droned on for more than half an hour, presenting a more reasoned rebuttal of the atheist position.

...At least I think he did. I wasn't really taking that much notice, if I'm honest.

—It was way too late by then, you see: I wasn't listening – and neither were my friends.

We'd lost interest in the programme; switched channels.

Better than that, we were exultant.

We'd beaten the enemy.

Victory!

## High on Castle Rock

*In which our hero abandons milk for acid and wanders deeper into the labyrinth, adding some confusing squiggly bits as he goes.*

*On the way, he describes Creation as 'quite a trick', becomes a Poodoo child, receives words of wisdom from the legendary Mick Jagger (twice), and finally leaves Psychedelia for Beanoland, where a cartoon character guides him back to base and things start to unravel.*

*Squiggly bits can be a bit of a bugger in a maze, though, so don't you be tempted down a dead-end.*

*Not that there's any chance, of course...*

*Quick as a spiv in pink knickers, right?*

**Tuten Leswan**

## Performance

In the late 60s and early 70s – while I was at university – I made some very serious attempts to mess up my head.

I don't just mean the acid (LSD), although that was there somewhere in the mix. I'm talking about deliberately setting out to question everything, undermine every assumption, destroy every certainty – all that stuff you do when you're 19.

...Which is what I was on the 20th of March 1970 – an important year in my life.

—Not because I was 19, I hasten to add. (Despite what others in here would have you believe.)

No, I'm talking about other, different stuff – people I met then, places I lived in and visited; that sort of happenstance.

—Most of it more or less irrelevant to this particular story, which is about a film that came out that year (although I didn't see it till at least the following year, I think...)

*Performance*, it was called.  
James Fox and Mick Jagger.

Actually, it's not really about the film as such. It's about something Mick Jagger – playing whoever – said in it. Something that had whatever I then called *here be dragons* bouncing up and around it in flashing multi-coloured neon the minute it tickled my eardrums...

Before I get to what, though, I need to explain a bit more about those head games I'd been playing with myself, about some of the places they'd taken me in '69, '70 and beyond, and about one particular puzzle they had me struggling with – that being why I was intrigued by what someone had Mick (or whoever he was playing) say in the film...

\*

I was having one of my searching for meaning bouts at the time – trying to make sense of it all I suppose you could say.

...Point is, when I went to see the film, I was in the middle of all this, and had come (unfortunately for me at the time; it was only making me miserable) to the unhappy conclusion that truth was a myth – that there was nothing to believe in anywhere, not even within my once hallowed science.

How I got to that sad little island is best explained by focusing on one particular jumble of thoughts – to do in the main with variations on what might be called the 'What came before God?' question...

I'd been there before, of course – while I was

debunking God at school. If God created everything, who created God – and who created him, her, it and so on and so forth – I would argue to anyone who'd listen. My basic point (and problem) being that the idea that someone called 'God' was the creator of everything didn't really seem to explain anything since we were still left with the question of what and who came before that...

By the time I saw the film, though, I'd moved on a bit and now had science in my sights as well.

Partly because of various LSD-inspired meditations on the nature of existence (don't laugh – I'm blushing as it is...), I'd got to thinking about how we'd got to where we were (scientific titans, what else?) from where we started out (cavemen with clubs, grappling with the world for the first time) and had realised that somewhere, way back when, we must have pretty much invented notions like space and time to help us make sense of the world.

We noticed that things changed – meals got eaten, fires went out, the sun rose and set – and we found it useful to think of these changes taking place over something we called (in whatever language) 'time'.

We noticed that things – meals, days, lives – had beginnings and ends in time and slipped into the assumption that everything had a beginning and end, time itself included...

But what if it didn't?

What if time, and the three dimensions of space, just gave us a grid we found useful in helping us talk about, think about, and operate in, the world we found ourselves



in – a model that worked for some things, but not necessarily for everything, everywhere, everywhen?

What if the grid went on forever because time itself was just a convenient fiction?

What if space was too?

What if all of our ideas were like that: useful, but with no ultimate bearing on the nature of things?

After all, how could time have had a beginning; what came before that?

—And if God created everything, who created God, I'd add, jumping the tracks. (I never said I was always coherent...)

—Did He create Himself out of the nothingness that must have existed before he brought the somethingness of existence into being out of the nothingness that presumably existed beforehand?

—Quite a trick, creating something out of the absence of something before you yourself even existed.

Quite a trick.

The more I thought about it, the more nonsensical it all seemed to become, and the more it became clear to me too that science was as limited as religion (in some important areas, at least); that what it gave us mainly was a set of useful models that helped us describe how various parts of the world worked most of the time, rather than ultimate ways of seeing and responding to existence...

And if science wasn't so hot then maybe we, its

inventors, weren't so hot, either...

Maybe my (rapidly fading) belief in it just showed how dumb I was?

Maybe our deepest thoughts were drivel?

Maybe the answers we found to what we tended to think of as the really big questions – answers like God, chance, whatever – were meaningless bunkum at some ultimate level?

If even the words and ideas we did our thinking with were suspect, maybe – probably – our questions were meaningless too...

Maybe everything was meaningless?

Maybe it all was...

Maybe even thinking about it was a pointless exercise in futility.

(And so on...)

(As Kurt V would probably say – read a fair bit of his stuff back then)

—Anyway, there you have it: that's where I was in my head when Mick opened those prodigious lips of his during *Performance* and said with that half-distracted look on his face:

'Nothing is true. Everything is permitted.'

—Which is to say, somewhere where I totally got the nothing is true part, but was left puzzled (and, yes, more than a little intrigued) by where he went next...

So much so that I spent a lot of the next couple of

years struggling with it – until I finally found an answer that made some kind of sense to me: one that totally changed the way I saw myself and other people and the world in general.

Maybe not one that explained what was meant in the film – not claiming that necessarily – just one that answered the need I'd felt in me the moment I'd heard that *everything is permitted* part; that tamed the dragon I still hadn't thought of back then...

One that pushed out beyond my debunking of science and religion (and everything else) and somehow found me solid ground I could make a stand on: that fulfilled the hinted at hope that maybe there was something more positive to be gleaned from my various head games than *nothing is true* (somewhat bleak, when what you've been doing is searching for meaning).

That, though, is another story. This one's done.

—By the way, that old parrot didn't squawk once as I composed and wrote the above, although I'd thought it would – was sure it would...

—Still, I do feel nearer to an answer now, though I couldn't say precisely how – except that I now realise where the next two stories are going, and that might be it.

...Then again, I don't seem to feel nervous about it any more, which might suggest the opposite; I don't know.

Let's find out together, hmm?

...That'll be fun.

## Bertie's Book

Some time after I saw *Performance* for the first time, but before I finished university, I was leafing through philosophy books in the library in George Square (can't remember why) and came across a book by Bertrand Russell.

Somewhere before its title page, I found a quotation that I'll still blather on about today if you let me, but is important here because it was in my head when I began the trip that helped me work out what that *everything is permitted* dragon was whispering in my lug.

At some point, I got it into my dizzy skull that Bertie himself had uttered this profundity, but I now think he must have been quoting someone else.

Either way, I've never been able to track it down again, despite trying – well – a whole range of stuff too boring to go into.

Not that the 'who' of it has anything to do with anything, particularly.

The point as far as this wee saga is concerned is the quotation itself: that and the influence it had on one of my many dalliances with the wondrous Lysergic Acid Diethylamide.

I seem to need to say at this point that I'm not a druggie.

Even in the early to mid seventies, LSD was the only thing I ever took more than once (as far as I remember – don't think I'm wrong) – and I haven't been anywhere near that or anything else (aside from alcohol) for a fair while now.

That said, I can't – won't – pretend that the influence those little tabs had on my life was anything less than positive...

(Half-tabs, I should probably say; I never ever took more than half a tab – out of caution the first time and then because I realised that half was as much as I needed to take me as far out there as I wanted to go and keep me there for... well, a very long time.)

Don't get me wrong, here: I'm not saying that dropping (half of) one of these little beauties (Strawberry Fields, California Sunshine, Purple Haze and many, many, nameless others) made me see God or anything remotely like that.

It's possible that some kind of spiritual awakening was what I hoped for when I first took the stuff (not sure now, to be honest – more likely I just read about the experiences of some rock star in *Oz* or *IT* and fancied a shot at the same old thing), but I'm not claiming (as some do) that I awakened my inner eye or anything, although it did undoubtedly have a long-term impact on how I saw and see things.

Revelatory enlightenment was in there, yes: but it was a more mundane sort...

It's like this: I didn't realise it was until I'd taken LSD a few times, but I was at a point in my life where I was close to a – largely unconscious – belief that I had the world all sized up...

It wasn't quite true that I had a place for everything and everything was in its place, but I was definitely on the brink of becoming that kind of person who knows the whys and wherefores of everything.

...Oh, I don't mean in terms of specifics: I knew quite well that I still had a universe of stuff to learn about in that sense – a multiverse, even.

In terms of general approach, though, I was close to assuming I had it all 'sussed' – science, not religion, was the path to enlightenment, left was better than right, the world was made of matter and energy, there were girls and boys in the world and nothing in between, and so on.

...Didn't think I knew all the answers or anything, but I did think I knew what most of the questions were, how the answers could be found and the basic nature of the reality that defined the edges of both.

Typical undergrad arrogance, probably – but there you have it.

Anyway, acid blew all that away – a good thing, not a bad one, in my view: showed me in no uncertain terms that there was more to everything than I'd started to imagine: opened my mind again in the nick of time, just as it was about to close forever...

Had me watching the sun come up in the middle of the

night when my eyes were firmly shut.

Had me realising that the book I saw with my eyes open wasn't the book at all but an image of it in my head.

...And that all the rest of what I knew as the world (my 'head' included) was like that too: a visual relationship between me and the world rather than the world as such.

Had me struggling with questions about the how of consciousness... of self-awareness... of little grey cells creating all these wonderful psychedelic pictures I would trip out on and watch for hours in my head.

...Had me wondering how these, and a whole raft of other incredibly fascinating things, could possibly work – and even sometimes finding reasonable answers too.

... Answers that sometimes – not always – still made sense when the stuff wore off...

—And still make sense now, decades further on.

Mostly.

...Course, it's also helped turn the landscape in here a little quirky, strange, even fanciful at times – you maybe noticed that, huh?

Crossed your mind already, has it? ...Chap sounds a bit off beam at times; all that stuff about live-in ex-teenagers, dragons, parrots, not being real...

...Lost it somewhere along the way for sure.

Probably the drugs...

—Well, maybe, but I don't think so, is all I can say on



that one.

What those little terrors mainly did I feel, was stop the curious core of me from permafrosting over; keep my imagination, my sense of wonder, my need to explore and know free and fresh: a good thing, not a bad one, I have to repeat (even if it does mean some of what surfaces in this chronicle sounds a bit trippy and dippy often as not).

(Nineteen's squirming a bit here, by the way – probably because he thinks all these pluses have withered on the vine of late – but it's mostly true, even so. Tim L's little tabs done good, whatever anyone else says or thinks.)

People talk about having bad trips, but I mostly avoided that.

Nearly had one, I think; early on.

Seemed to me it was going bad, anyway.

—Got a serious dose of Nineteen-style panic attack.

—All my thoughts turned doleful and dismal.

—And the vivid visuals started to go awry, become distorted, threatening: a half-insane lunacy of dark surrealist madness sucking me into its maw like a ravenous, galaxy-spanning, black malevolence...

(Or something...)

Fought it off, though – somehow managed to draw back and look at what was happening to me with a logical and objective (inner) eye till it all subsided, turned gleefully psychedelic again...

Never had a 'bad trip' after that little scary: always too focused on the wow and how of it all; too much the (observational, analytical) scientist you might say, even

about myself...

Too busy asking questions – and struggling, sometimes for hours and hours, to find answers – to worry about melting faces, girls with hairy caterpillar eyelashes, and crazed, gibbering, mutants slithering out of the curtains to grip and eat your heart...

—Didn't help me with that *nothing is true, everything is permitted* thing, though...

—Not, that is, until the trip I'm about to visit now came along and that quote from Bertie's Book – 'it matters little what you believe, so long as you don't altogether believe it' – suddenly duttled my sturkles.

## Poo Doo Child

The words were rattling around my brain as the acid kicked in – and they immediately began adding their tuppence worth to the trip: a noisy, cartoon-like series of funny little innerspace cameos on one-off topics that all linked together into something bigger (don't ask me what).

Most of the detail is lost to me now – all I really remember is the bit with Mick Jagger in it, which I still find I can call up the threads of more or less at will...

It's never quite the same thing twice when I try to tell it, but this is the gist:

Two psychologists – Dr Doo and Professor Poo – walk into a bar, grab some drinks, find a cosy corner and settle down to watch the cabaret for the night, which happens to be Mick and the rest of the Stones (it's a big bar).

They chat away for a while, waiting for the show to begin, but are soon doing what they do best: arguing – in this case about the best advice scientists of mind and behaviour such as themselves can offer humanity.

'It's really quite simple,' opines Doo. 'I've been studying the sad case of an actor who got so used to being the murderer in a Jack The Ripper drama he started to believe he really was Jack – gutted half the cast before

they caught him...

'Made me realise that the world would be a better place if we were all a bit like the actor he was supposed to be...

'If we thought of ourselves as just playing parts – however passionately – we'd maybe stop ourselves before we did anything extreme like slaughter children or torture unbelievers...

'It might not guarantee that but it would maybe at least put such behaviour under some kind of conscious control instead of being a blind, emotion-fuelled, more or less unthinking, reaction to the thing we believe we hate.

'...The best advice I can offer humankind is this,' says he, turning over a bar mat and writing it down in big blue letters (then underlining the second half of it three times in case anyone should miss the point):

Always remember: *It matters little what you believe, so long as you don't altogether believe it!*

Poo, though, is not impressed...

'No, no,' he says, 'not good enough – not by itself anyway...

'When you study humanity in *real* depth as I do, you soon realise that the important thing about us is that we aren't like electrons or planets, behaving in fixed ways in particular situations.

'How we act and feel – who we are in any given

situation – depends on how we see ourselves, or the world, or the two of those together, at that particular point in time...

'A flat earther and a merchant explorer are both people, but give them the chance of sailing to America with Columbus and one will see a chance to go up in the world, and the other to fall off the edge...

'Even if they're players on a stage, how they act and think and feel will be pretty predetermined – and if they are total believers, or somewhere in between, the trap will be tighter and more inescapable.'

'Not quite believing is not quite enough,' he sails on, raising his voice a bit as the Stones start tuning up a few feet from their table.

'How you see things – yourself, the world, whatever – will still determine how you feel and behave to some extent, even if you think of it all as a part you have consciously chosen to play.

'...No, us scientists need to make sure that the view people have of who they are and what the world is like is an accurate reflection of the reality of things – a scientifically true picture of the world at large and our true relationship to it.'

'—Yes, I see,' interrupts Doo (mildly distracted as Mick gets himself going with a practice flounce or two up and down the stage but determined to get a word in edgeways anyway).

'What you're saying is that we should teach people to

see everything, including themselves, in the one and only true way – the way science shows it to be.

‘We should teach them all to see the world scientifically in terms of atoms, electrons, energy, brains, neurons – to be scientists.’

‘Nope; not that simple,’ Poo pooh-poohs.

‘The ways in which a person can picture the world and their own place in it are legion, possibly limitless,’ he posits importantly, poking his pointing finger into Doo’s shoulder to accentuate the lesson,

‘...which means that the possible ways people can act, think and feel within any one situation are as well.

‘...They can be poets,’ (poke) ‘engineers,’ (poke) ‘Buddhists,’ (poke) ‘Baptists,’ (poke) ‘Anatolian mystics,’ (poke) ‘or a whole limitless range of other things’ (failed poke as Doo scrapes his chair back to elude him)

‘—either by having that take on the world, or having it on themselves, or both.

‘—Teach them only the scientist’s take on things,’ he ploughs on unabashed, ‘and you jam them into one narrow frequency band of their possibilities as humans.

‘...Worse, you commit the ultimate scientific crime,’ he purports, upping the volume again as Mick sings an exploratory (and apt) ‘gas, gas, gas’... to test the mike,

‘you let your own view of how things are change the behaviour of what you are studying so that it always confirms that view.

‘—Make it so that the people you study only ever behave like the scientists you tell them they should be.

'...Observing them afterwards...', he starts, trying another poke at Doo but failing to connect,

'...observing them afterwards will show you that the people we study are all always scientists – that they never feel or behave or think like mystics or poets or whatever...

'But only because that's what you and your ideas about how the world is and how they are have made them.

'You may have given them a scientifically true view of the rest of the world,' he yells as the Stones blast into their first ditty, 'but you won't have given them a true view of themselves and their real relationship to it.

'...Any properly conducted scientific observation of people will tell you our behavioural and experiential relationship to the world is variable,' he shrieks, 'that it changes according to how we see ourselves and the world.

'...But you'll have given the impression that it is fixed – that the scientist's take on things and people is the only one there is.

'...Worse than that,' he screams after a pause, 'you'll actually have screwed up any future scientific observations you make by arranging things so that it actually seems as though it *is* fixed...

'—You'll have committed the ultimate scientific crime as I said: made them into what your (imperfect) science told them they were.

'—Unless, of course, you're a certified genius like me,' he smugs, drawing his chair close to Doo's and yelling in his ear.

'In which case, what?' hollers Doo, still hoping to make a comeback.

'In which case, you realise that, within certain physical limitations, a person's relationship to the world can be anything they can imagine it to be,' pokes Poo.

'...Any one of a million trillion views of the world, or ourselves, or ourselves in the world, or, indeed, beliefs about existence, can determine the experiences and behaviours of the humans we both study,' he yells.

'...That's the truth of it,' (poke)

'...The only accurate reflection of the reality of the situation...' (poke, poke)

'Scientific fact, no question...' (poke, poke, poke)

'...Just like your murderous actor took a fiction and made it a hard personal fact by believing too much,' he screams, 'so any one of us can take any self or world view, fact or fiction, and make it the fact of who we are in the same way.

'The end result, though,' he sails on, ignoring Doo's rueful smirk as Mick starts up with 'You're the kind of person you meet at certain dismal, dull affairs',

'...is someone who is, in fact, a fictional human being – truly an atheist or a Buddhist or a scientist or a poet with the associated fixed relationship to the world... but not really a whole human with the variable or fluid one that science and logic and simple common sense tells us is the real fact of the matter.

'People spend whole lifetimes looking for some kind of ultimate philosophical, religious, or scientific truth that



can guide their lives. But real enlightenment comes from seeing that when it comes to deciding how we should act and feel about the universe, life, all that stuff – who we should be, how we should relate to existence – there is no ultimate truth.

'...Those who look for enlightenment in the form of some kind of ultimate truth,' he portends, wholly unaware of Doo's grin widening as Mick belts out 'It's just your nineteenth nervous breakdown',

'...wander off down the blindest of blind alleys.

'They abandon the very thing they seek – an understanding of their real relationship to existence, which is variable and fluid – and replace it with its opposite: a fixed, fictional relationship embedded in their psyche by some imagined form of ultimate truth.

'It's really quite ironic.'

'Okay, fine,' says Doo, with just a tincture of sarcasm. 'So what's the best advice *you* can offer us lesser fellow mortals, then?'

'That's easy,' shouts Poo, 'live your lives like actors as you suggest, but as actors with the whole wide world of parts in their repertoires not just one or two: as though every possible take on things is a potentially valid way of seeing and being in any given situation – because that's the way it is.

'Of course, not everybody can be a skilled opera singer or brain surgeon just by seeing themselves as that, but that's just a matter of adding experience and common

sense to the first pass.

'Entertaining the possibility might be the first step on the road to making it happen anyway, but even if it isn't, fantasising about it, or taking the part in a play is all part of being human.

'—Which is really the point of the whole thing: letting ourselves be whoever we want or need or fancy being in any given situation. Permitting ourselves the widest possible experience.'

'We're both right then,' screams Doo, happy to hear Poo seeming to agree with his point about actors.

'Not really,' retorts Poo, turning up his metaphorical nose at any suggestion of equivalence.

...My advice – to live your life and see yourself and the world as though *nothing is true, everything is permitted* – encompasses yours and expands on it.

'Mine is the more general scientific truth.

'I'm the only one who's right here,' he prods triumphantly as the lights dim and the scene fades...

At which point, of course, Mick steals the show, bounds down from the stage and pouts out:

'Told you once, told you twice,  
never listened to my advice,

nuthin's true, everything's permitted,  
ask me guys, you're both half-witted.

Get yer ya yas out!

Yeah!’

**No, No, *Not That!***

Hmm...

My cunning plan at this point was to come in with the fourth in a clutch of stories aiming to prove I'd probably screwed myself up down along the way: the last of the bunch being this truly gripping tale of what happened to me in a maths lecture once.

You'll never hear it now, though.

Disappointing, I know, but there it is.

...Was pretty sure I was on the right track for a while, too: that all that business of messing up my head with convoluted logic, acid inspired imaginings, and the thoughts of Chairman Poo had made me doubt everything, including myself... Left me believing there wasn't really anyone in here: just some player of various bit parts, who didn't feel he was any of them – didn't feel real.

Doesn't actually convince me, though; that's the sticky bit...

What I took from the Poo trip was that we should be more *like* actors playing parts, not that we should just variously be this vacuous role then that: an empty

cacophony of pretender theatrics with only void as its unsteady heart.

...Remember thinking it was more like having a safety valve – like being totally and completely into who or what you are at a given time, but always waking up, or coming to your senses, before you take it (or it takes you) to extremes.

... Just everyday stuff really.

—I assume that's what our stars of stage and screen are like anyway, no?

Pretty sure they won't have a problem with that imposter stuff as they head off home of an evening – no matter how many roles they take on.

—Plus, they're pulling the levers when they're up there playing, with me there's something else doing the yanking and cranking. Wouldn't be a problem if I was just hamming it up, would it?

\*

—Never really went that deep with it anyway.

It pacified the frenzy of my search for some kind of meaning of life fix, I'm sure... (Giving me a take on things that let me quietly abandon the big search in favour of smaller, more personal, answers.)

Maybe even had a long term drip, drip, drip effect on how I tend to see and think of myself (and things in general)...

That was near enough it, though. I only ever took it so far.

—Crossed my mind at the time the Poo trip suggested I should change who I was, rather than just the way I thought about myself, but I never really got much beyond just mulling it over, to be honest...

—Evangelised about it at parties a bit, maybe: boasted to any doe-eyed damsel I could get to listen I'd one day change the world with these psychedelic revelations I'd had... (Acquired a few of those blank looks I've gotten so used to I seem to recall...)

Never tried to work the trick on myself, though.

...Idea made me – or Nineteen, who I pretty much was back then – more than a little edgy I seem to remember: put me off going anywhere too deep with it: drove me into the safer territory of long words and big ideas that served me so well when that bad trip came calling.

...Wondering about it again now, as it happens, for whatever that may be worth...

...Wondering too if I've maybe hit on the sad truth of how Nineteen could possibly have 'ended up as me' – if there, back then, he did it to himself: started to become old 'stay-away-from-turmoil if I can man'. (Ducking and diving away from something he sensed was taking us too close for comfort to that broken, can't be fixed bit, preferring not to go too far in, to stay instead with my long

words and all.)

...Could be that was where this whole voyage of self-discovery caboodle started up, coming round again full circle as that glimpse of grey hairs began bringing him and his take on things back into my mainstream...

—Not that I feel I could ever really know for sure any more, but it's a thought, isn't it?

—Could be true.

...Or not, I suppose. Nineteen's not too keen on the theory... (Wriggling about like a worm in a blackbird's beak, he is...)

...But, I'm off on a drift off again.

...Point is that nothing that came from the Poo trip seems strong enough to explain the debilitating crunch of this feeling that sometimes there's nobody safe in here running things.

...Which is precisely what Polly has been telling me with her stony silence for three and a bit chapters now, I think: and why she started up again as soon as I veered off from my chosen course: a particularly loud squawk to do with belief being way more powerful than the lack of it. (Tinged with just a hint of 'I could have told you so, if only you hadn't been too hell bent on going the wrong way to listen...').

That, and a strong nudge in a direction I'd really rather not go in...

Even though I know it's now the one trail left  
untravelled...



## The Third Cartoon

It's been months since Polly pushed me in this direction: a sign of how reluctant I am to stir up the black memories I fear this next episode will arouse.

I have to keep going now, though, so I've dragged myself back to the laptop, ready to start again.

I'd say 'ready and willing', but the truth is I'm somewhat less than enthused by the thought – 'ready and determined' if you like, but not particularly keen...

More than a little on edge, if truth be told.

More than a little afraid I've finally reached the lair of the daddy dragon – that this is why I've been so reluctant to venture in.

...Must push on through it, though.

Feel I've discovered something crucial: something that makes sense as the root of the thing...

The problem isn't what I don't believe – it's the opposite of that.

This is what Polly was hinting at back then with her belief being stronger than disbelief squawk, I think... (And I've been edging round to ever since...)

Buried somewhere deep inside me, somewhere ‘darker than a dark black hole’ as my friend Aldaw’s song puts it, is not just a lack of belief that there’s anyone safe in here running things – anyone real – but an actual and absolute belief that I’m not who I pretend to be.

More than a belief, really – an unchallenged unconscious assumption and certainty that, in the end, that’s the undisputed truth of it; the whole song and dance.

...I’m like the actor who really became ‘Jack’ when it hits – lost to a nightmare role I can’t control.

—Can’t even see beyond.

Don’t know how things got that way but I need to find out – even though I don’t really want to (who knows what I’ll find, right?).

—I assume some black episode from my early life is to blame, though, and as black episodes go, this was way up there with the worst of them.

(And I never worked out why, so maybe it’s time to try.)

...It wasn’t an early episode as such, admittedly – quite the opposite, in fact. But it did have links going way back, so maybe that’s it.

Hope so, anyway, ‘cos I’ve nothing else left.

Not a dicky bird.

We're jumping back here to my 40th birthday...

Wasn't particularly looking forward to it, I have to say, but when the day came Bee and the kids turned it into something really special: forty individual presents, all beautifully wrapped and gift-tagged, lined up round the walls of the room like a carnival parade.

...Can't remember what they all were now (Bee probably has a list somewhere) – but that's not really the point...

It was the overall effect that got to me.

—I was delighted; totally bowled over.

...Remember thinking during the great unwrapping that followed how lucky I'd been with everything – wonderful family, house of my own, reasonably interesting job, standard of living way beyond what my dad had, and so forth.

—Who'd have thought that just a few months later I'd be immersed in gloom and doom; wondering what the point of it all was; too depressed to bother doing anything other than go through the proverbial motions?

...And all because of one of these terrific presents: a book of *Dennis the Menace* cartoons – appropriate because I was called Dennis too, and we were both from Dundee (the Menace is a *Beano* character).

...I started leafing through the strips, reading one here and there, pleased to get it.

...So it was a while before I noticed what my family had obviously been waiting (I now realised) on me spotting (how they managed to stay quiet about it that long, I'll never know).

The book was a *Dennis the Menace* 40th Birthday edition.

We were both of us 40 that year (1991)!

Two Dennises born in Dundee in 1951...

I was intrigued: so intrigued, in fact, that I decided to do some research on Dennis the Menace – find out more...

(Big mistake, as it turned out, although the reasons had little or nothing to do with Dennis the Menace as such.)

\*

...Didn't do it right away as it happens: forgot about the whole thing for at least 6 months...

Eventually, though, I did a little digging – and found out three things that intrigued me even more...

First, there was another Dennis the Menace – a US cartoon character, also 'born' in 1951...

Second, he first saw the light of day as a published comic strip on March 12th of that year – eight days before I bawled my way into the world on March 20th...

Third, the other character – my Dennis – first appeared in the Beano on the 17th of March 1951...

—We'd all been 'born' within eight days of each

other!

(A huge coincidence probably, but it started me wondering about a connection anyway.)

—Not that I got very far with it.

I knew from things my dad had said when I was younger and going through a period at school when I was uncomfortable about my name that calling me Dennis was my mum's idea.

He'd wanted a Scottish name and thought of Dennis as French (it wasn't, Dad – not with a double n) – but she'd been insistent and he'd given in.

...So I started wondering if she could have seen the comic Dennis around the time of my birth and decided that was the name for me.

—Seemed possible, of course, but a bit unlikely. Even if she was someone who'd read the Beano at 22, why suddenly light on this new character as someone to name your son after?

...Especially when you consider what the character is like.

Not exactly the obvious chappie to name your baby boy for, I'd have thought...

I was stumped almost before I'd started...

If there was a connection, I couldn't see it.

... And, of course, there was no way of finding out.  
Mum was long gone by then – even Dad was.  
I had to leave it at that: forget the whole thing.

Which should have been the end of it, I suppose.  
—But wasn't.

Somewhere along the way, I conjured up this image of myself as 'the third cartoon', roughed out early on by my mother but left unfinished by her early death.

...Just a whimsy it was at first: a silly notion to chuckle over.

But it wouldn't let me go...

After a while – a few weeks maybe – I'd begun calling the image up and moping over it on a regular basis, making it the focal point of a whole tumbril of unhappy thoughts about real or imagined deficiencies in my character.

...Letting it become an obsession, the epicentre of a deepening depression that made me miserable (and almost entirely useless to everybody) for weeks and months.

—Until, at any rate, the necessities of rushing around, trying to earn a living, forced me to pull myself together and push it into the periphery (where it still lurks, I fear, waiting to suck me under whenever I get an urge towards self-flagellation).

I suppose, in retrospect, it wasn't so awful – a debilitating downer that made me a pain to everyone, including myself; that's all...

I wasn't suicidal or anything, just fed up, and so self-absorbed I could barely be bothered talking to anyone.

(Or even, sometimes, getting up in the morning if I'm honest...)

Still doesn't mean I want to go back there, though...

But here I am, doing it anyway; framing the context an' all...

Reluctant, but suddenly sure that's where I'm going to have to go if I want to find what I'm looking for...

Down into misery.

Boohoo.

Ha ha.

...Except there's no down or up: no direction to go in.

Just me in here, idling unhappily around some vague notion of a cartoon face and character I can never quite make out; never quite make sense of...

Stuck, pretty much; wondering what to do...

Waiting for something to happen; willing the melancholy to hit...

—And it does too, after a bit: wells up out of the

dark, though not quite how I expect.

—Not a maelstrom of desolation and despair, sucking me down to a sandy bottom to spot the dart of an answer fish as I gasp my last.

...A sudden tsunami of gentle release as the earth cracks and shifts and I'm swept away on wave after wave after wave of – well – *just knowing*.

*Knowing that a baby of 18 months or less doesn't have the words yet, but does know who he is, even so.*

*Knows from the constant attentions of the pretty lady who feeds and holds and coos her way through his every waking moment.*

*Smiling and smiling and smiling...*

*Knows he's the centre of the only universe that matters: her universe.*

*Knows he is somebody important.*

*Knows it with a certainty as unshakeable as the knowledge she will always come when he calls; will always be there...*

*Knows it till one bleak day when, for no reason he can know, she never comes again – even though he keeps trying to make her come again, and keeps hoping she will.*

*She's just suddenly gone.*

*And he can't ask anyone where she's gone, because he doesn't have the words.*

*And no-one can tell him – or will even try.*



*But he's still there, in the wordless ache for her, and  
he must be wondering, mustn't he?*

*Even though he has no words to think 'What have I  
done to make her go?'*

*He must be thinking it in some vague baby way,  
surely?*

*I'm not who I thought I was.*

*I'm not important after all.*

*I'm nobody much at all...*

\*

Don't get me wrong here: I don't mean I remembered all  
this – just that I suddenly thought I saw and felt how it must  
have been...

And became convinced it was the answer I'd been  
looking for...

Not just because of the logic of it (although that, I  
have to say, seems sound enough), but because of how well  
it passed the litmus test of my own reactions.

...Because now there is a memory of sorts – at least I  
think it's a memory.

A breath of something warm and close that once was  
mine...

And tears, too – there are tears running down my poor

pathetic face.

...And a taste of salt on my lips.

## Moment of Forever

*In which our hero finally realises something significant about the logic of existence, rants on about it for a while to anyone who's still with us, and imagines a new race of transcendent beings desperate to read his book.*

*Inevitably, he then somehow gets lost again – before finally twigging to the point of the thing further on down the bandanna.*

*Don't let him get to you, though, okay?*

*You're just better is the thing, you see...*

*Faster than a floosie in a fishnet frock is what...*

*On the ball and spinning like a rubber in a flush...*

**Tuten Leswan**

## Soulcatcher

It was – if you'll forgive the phrase – a moment of high drama, for me if for no one else.

I'd not only found my answer: I'd rediscovered – in that something warm and close – something of my mother inside me.

A piece of her soul, if you'll allow what I said earlier about Dad living on in my head...

It's how I choose to see it, anyway...

My heart's already busy, doing the things it does, to draw that something near and keep it close.

Weaving it into my own soul where I can always find it; always find her...

Writing Mum back into my story.

There's more, though...

Other thoughts crowd in as I write: focus on what the moment means for me – that I've found a missing piece of myself as well, but more than that, that I now have a better feel for who I've been and need to become...

Not just because these various episodes have drawn out forgotten detail (although that's part of it too), but because that 'moment of high drama' (did I really call it

that?) showed me its first flickerings...

How it started, where it came from, how it grew.  
How I got here from there, ultimately; that, too.  
—Yes, and where ‘here’ is and ‘there’ was as well...

Me-ness torn from a warm womb, soothed by a mother’s breast.

Cycles of need and want and comfort: drawing the first green shoots out towards the sun of her arriving welcome, the moon of her parting smile...

Eating, sleeping, waking, needing, remonstrating...  
Bawling for attention and comfort; getting them both, time after time after time...

Assuming a pattern of success, developing a sense of worth, a tendril of self-belief...

Hopeful, but fragile, thin – rootless, almost.  
Strong enough to grow through her warm protection; lost and bereft as the memory of that warmth faded and failed.

But there afterwards just the same, a ruin of doubt near the core of me.

Forgotten – buried alive – as the days passed and others came to meet my wants and needs; help me reimagine myself in a world without her smiles...

...Because that’s how it goes I think...

Pulled hither and thither by our own needs and wishes on the one hand – and the pulls and pushes and hugs and bruises we get from the people, places, things and

happenings around us on the other – we dream ourselves into being, gradually building a story to meet the demands of the world we find ourselves in and our own wants and wishes in it.

A story that grows with us, spinning off plots and sub-plots, episode after little episode, each woven into something deeper, fuller, more complex as time moves on.

The great tale of our lives, expressing our essential uniqueness, from first flickerings to last...

A story built from half-believed fictions, that either edge closer to fact, feeding our self-belief, as we grow into them (meeting whatever challenges the world throws at our presumption), or crash and burn in the fierce fires of reality and need to be re-worked; reinvented in a form more credibly amenable to realisation.

A story that is who we are to ourselves, the tale the teller and the teller the tale: a whole vast yarn of who we've been, where we're at now and who we might be someday (maybe)...

Us. Our story.

Our own personal soulcatcher.

The tale we tell, and that tells us in its turn; that maps, guides, supports, engages, and – yes, sometimes – traps and limits us.

\*

And it's never simple, either; is it?

Our limiting hedges can sometimes be useful

protection and support; learned outliers of our capabilities...

But they can just as easily be barriers to progress we might otherwise make, given the chance.

...And the traps can be someone telling us we're stupid till we mostly half-believe it and play the game accordingly.

...Or they can be honey traps: positive while the going's good, but liable to turn sour if circumstances change (as with me and my mother).

And that's part of what I've been digging out, I think, from that *nothing is true* and *it matters little* stuff...

Depending on our circumstances from week to week and year to year, the various bits 'n' bobs of our 'great tale' (even the subconscious ones – especially those) can either give us the support we need and the limitations that protect us, or they can leave us crippled, barely able to function, wondering which way is up.

(Which means they can screw us up good if we happen on circumstances the script can't handle.)

\*

—But only if we let it go that way, I think...

Not if we keep on growing, keep on changing, keep on doing what I'm doing right now: re-imagining self and

soul: re-drafting my story to include not just more of my mother, but a few other things as well...

Things I've discovered – or re-discovered – in my various trips down *Here Be Dragons* Lane...

Perspectives I once had that seem to have slipped away somehow, but that now have me picturing a new me, scoping out a new path for myself, seeing where I'm going with all this, knowing what I need to do next...

Knowing because I know what I am now, what we all are – what we should be at any rate...

I don't have a word for it yet, but what I'm thinking really is just 'human' – except that what I mean by that is the exact opposite of what I think we're mostly brought up to be.

Because, of course, all that growing, changing and re-imagining may go on mostly in our heads, but it doesn't happen in a vacuum. We're led by the nose for the most part, our options squeezed into a narrow band by family, friends, teachers, social, cultural, religious, and political expectations, even philosophical and scientific views of what 'human' is or means.

And although in most cases it's usual for us to be shown a range of options as to who we might be, where we might fit, what stereotypes might best suit us and so on, the push and pull of it is never towards old Mick's *nothing is true, everything is permitted* – the liberation of self and soul from particular limited perspectives a la Prof Poo.



No, the pressure, or, at least, the (unspoken and unwritten) assumption we grow up with is that our aim should be to take on a range of the roles presented to us by these influences and make them our own – use them to largely fix our relationship to the world and how we see, feel, think and act in it...

Become them.

Make them real.

—Even though it would be far more accurate to say that we're really letting them become us...

Adopting a limited view of who we are, and what we can be (and what we can see)...

Taking a fictional (or, at least, artificially limited) view of what we are to and in the world, and what the world is to us.

Giving it power over ourselves.

Making fact and fiction fictional fact, and ourselves something less than fully human. (As I would see it.)

No one tells us that we are not like atoms or planets or falling apples, our behaviour in the world and experience of it fixed by our physicality – that how we experience the world and behave in it is hugely influenced by whatever perspective on ourselves, or the world, or ourselves in the world, happens to be dominating our 'soul' at a particular place and time...

No one points out that our true relationship to the world around us is fluid, not fixed...

That we have an infinity of useful self and world views available to us and can adopt any one of them either temporarily (good) or permanently (not so good), and that, therefore, our true self should include all of them as possibles and none of them as absolutes...

No-one points out that if we adopt a particular view on a permanent basis we become fixed, make it real, take this or that fact or fiction and make it a fact for us by letting it always determine how we feel and think and behave...

No one ever mentions when teaching us all these other things about our role in life, that the desired aim of all that teaching and of our own efforts should be to see us rise above this useful perspective and that one – to use them as stepping stones towards a full realisation of who and what we really are; what we can be...

Not a limited, caught up in this perspective or that, 'made in wherever' human...

A fully realised 'every which way' human with a plethora of perspectives ready to serve this need, that circumstance, this or that personal whimsy, or whatever...

A real human, if I can put it like that...

Someone who realises that any time we take a particular view of the world, allow a particular relationship to take us over, even a useful one, we are adopting a fictional view of ourselves and can only safely assume it is a limited, temporary view and relationship –

fictual, rather than factual, you might say...

Someone who therefore makes all such perspectives his or her own, identifying with all of them by favouring none...

Using any one as the need arises or the notion takes...

Recognising, in the last analysis, that, yes, *it matters little what you believe, so long as you don't altogether believe it...*

Someone who has liberated him or herself from fixed views and stereotypes: a whole, or fully realised, human if you like...

No one points out any of that. Which means that none of us ever really consider it...

—Yet it must be true, mustn't it?

If our relationship can be any of these things – if it is variable or fluid – then the true human self, the best catcher for the human soul, collective or individual, must be one that reflects and allows that...

Anything less limits and skews our real nature, I'd say, and we shouldn't let it stand...

We should fight it in our societies, our religions and philosophies, our schools: wherever it falls...

Rise up against it – struggle instead to build a better (human) soulcatcher.

...Argue that the end point of any true education should be the development of a fully human soul; not something less than that.

—And do it for ourselves, whatever.

Recognise that there's more to ourselves in the world than one or a few limited perspectives would allow.

Avoid committing ourselves totally and exclusively and absolutely to even the select few we regard as truths, whether for good reasons or bad.

—Whatever you regard as (absolutely) true: scientific fact or religious certainty, forget it now.

The truth won't set you free – no one truth will at any rate.

(Unless, that is, it's this: as far as defining and capturing the human self and soul is concerned, *nothing is true, everything is permitted.*)

\*

It all sounds a bit like 'anything goes', I suppose, but that's not it.

...I'm not saying one way of looking at things is as good as any other, regardless of the circumstances.

...Or that nothing is true and everything permitted when we're talking of individual instances: such as whether Earth is round, or murder is wrong, or carbon monoxide kills.

I'm not suggesting we've nothing at all to learn from our cultures, societies, teachers, parents, friends, neighbours, the world around us, whatever – that we don't need to understand the world as science shows us it, for

instance, and recognise the difference between fact and fiction in that sense.

...Or learn how our society, or culture, or religion (if we have one) sees things, and why.

...Or see why it's unacceptable to kill or rape or steal.

Or recognise the practical value of certain truths, or the survival value of this or that myth or belief, in particular sets of circumstances.

All that is a whole big chunk of being fully human – of course it is.

Along with all those personal little wars we wage with ourselves as we struggle to see better, be better, comprehend and grow...

Yes, and the application of simple common sense when our fantasies take us a little too far beyond our real capabilities; that, too...

They are all only pieces of the jigsaw I think, though: not enough in themselves.

Unless we move beyond – become fully realised, a real human – there is something missing.

The thing that says none of these perspectives define me; there's more, much more to being me, to being human, than that...

The thing that opens our minds to the wider possibilities and frees us from limited fixed viewpoints (scientific or religious or philosophical or social or whatever)...

An over-arching ‘take’ on things that pulls us out and beyond this perspective and that perspective, sets us free to be creative in our responses to the world and existence and makes us fully human: someone who recognises that, in the last analysis, fixed definitions of what that means are for Dodos...

\*

—So, yes, I know where I’m going next.

I’m going back inside to where fact can become fiction and fiction fact and I’m going to become... well, the *human* me, I suppose.

...Do what I thought about but never did post Poo.

...Go beyond re-imagining to re-invention: rearrange my world (every which way).

It’s all very exciting, I feel; even Nineteen thinks it is – says maybe I might turn out fine, after all.

—He’s already fantasising about it all in fact (at least I think he’s fantasising...). Gone all evangelista he has... (Well, it went so well the last time...)

Apparently wants us to publish this tale (with various tweaks of his own), influence everyone, turn the planet outside in...

Flood it with all these *everything is permitted* people we seem to have decided to call *Ficts*...

People who play at being Inlanders and Outlanders, Lefties and Righties, Scoffers and Believers, Antis and Pros, or whatever – maybe even play quite hard – but not to the point where they lose their sense of proportion or their sense of humour...

People who are humans – real humans – first and last: who treat their various ways of looking at the world, and themselves in it, as myths – myths to live by, but myths just the same...

People who want to work together with others with that take on things and use their imagination to find new inner landscapes to explore, new corners of the human soul to inhabit...

People who want to go on discovering what that means.

Build us all a better soulcatcher.

Move on up the road.

## Nothru Road

Turns out there's a bit of a fly in the old ointment, though...

Can't figure out the 'how' of this *every which way* thing.

...Month and a half or more down the way and no forward movement at all to report down those parts. (Unless you see going backwards as progress, that is.)

(Nineteen's got this disgusted thing going on – but I'm basically just 'stuck'...)

...Not that it's stopped me writing, you understand – nope!

Just last night, I spent a contented forty-five minutes or so sketching out a brief prologue to what is now to be known as 'the book': slotting it in before the first story, cute as you like.

...Trying to keep my hopes up as much as anything I think – to convince myself that it's all going to come out right.

Doesn't look much like it is, at the moment, though...

...Which is why I'm sitting morosely at the table in this daft old kitchen at twelve past midnight, scribbling



notes and doodles on random bits of paper, screwing them up, and chucking them at the bin that isn't in the corner any more.

(Or was doing till a moment ago when I stopped chucking and started typing...)

...All seemed simple enough, first off.

Do what I always do, I thought – dream up a new me: a new *everything is permitted* me.

No problemo.

But how do you do it?

How do you see yourself as everything?

Rehearse your way into an infinity of roles or something?

I don't think so.

—Then, what, hmm? *What?!*

Answers on a postcard please, to:

Me Meme,  
Nothru Road,  
Much Wailing on the Gnash,  
Nonoland

## Denizen

*Wumbalumba!*

—*Got it! Got it! Got it!*

Simple as you like it is, as well – just everyday, practical, seeing things as they are and going with it stuff.

...Conjure up a hotch-potch of everything you could ever possibly experience – sunset over the Adriatic, a broken brick, the sound of silence, a blue moon, your body hot and bothered, a wet rag, a tartan curmudgeonly with hobnailed boots – everything.

Now sniff out the one thing they all have in common: the basic underlying *stuff* of every conscious moment, every experience: the *whatever it is* they're all made of that's both everything and (almost) nothing.

Pinpoint that inside yourself, and there you have it: what you are beyond and outwith these things we all dream up...

The one thing about us that's undeniably there; undeniably real...

The one thing you can't take away and still be there yourself...

The *whatever it is* beyond these words we think in and feelings we feel in: the thing they're *in*, whatever it is.

Undiluted essence of isness, maybe.

Quintessence of being, even...

See yourself as that and nothing else ultimately – take every dreamt up view or perspective or thought or whatever with a healthy pinch of *nothing is true, everything is permitted* - and you're there: a fully fictish *every which way* unfettered denizen of wii.

(Or on the way there, at least...)

Beyond this perspective and that, word-bound or otherwise...

Beyond 'beyond', in fact – or any other tag or tale you might dream up...

Beyond fact and fiction both, for that matter...

(Whatever it is, it isn't true or false, it's real, it just is – believing has no say in the matter.)

Beyond 'real' and 'unreal' even...

Real beyond belief.

Every slant and facet there to use... but with none of them between you and... well, *whatever it is*.

—It's how I see it, anyway: where I'm heading next...

Sitting outside of this slant and that, including them all by favouring none...

Still sparking up this or that or the next way of seeing things as the need arises or the fancy takes, but not getting

carried away by any particular one. (*They're not me, this whatever it is is...*)

Being 'nothing' and everything at the same time, you might say...

Dreaming: not the dreamer, not the dream.

Letting me safety valve out beyond heart and head when that unreal – nobody safe in here running things – imposter feeling bites... (Hopefully – eventually, anyway; that one might be harder to shake...)

Bobbing about in unsculpted *essence of isness* – where no trap can hold me or break me, honeyed or otherwise...

(Yes: and seeing every one of us as just this mazy *whatever it is* with variations on a theme – free from the lazy apartheid-think that paints us subhuman scapegoats of colour, gender mix, creed, whatever, to blame, persecute, and destroy...)

Equality in a basket, maybe.

...Or a basket case.

\*

It's what I believe, anyway. (Or nearly do...)

We'll see how things develop in the longer term, I guess.

—Or I will, at least...

I'm about to go dark, you see – put this saga to bed.  
Bid adieu to you...

Nineteen and I had a wee chat about it (existence whispering to itself in the dark, maybe). Decided we saw I to I on the thing and it was maybe time to quit; that learning to stick with *whatever it is* and not get hooked on this dream or that would be a long and doleful struggle we probably didn't want to be writing on and on about for ever and ever (and ever).

(Or forcing anyone to suck up every splurge and dribble of either...)

—So, yes, I'm wondering about closing the thing on down...

Just not quite sure yet how to go about doing it.

Guess what I'm mostly thinking, though, is that what I think matters less here than what I feel...

And what I feel is...

Well... flick this page away and we'll go there now.

## Dark Island

What I feel is maybe a little drunk – but that's by the by.

Bee has gone to bed and I'm sitting here at the kitchen table with a sweet Dark Island in one paw and a laptop in the other, groping my way towards the detail of a story about the *wii* thing that says how I feel better than I can: a story I got from an Alan Wilson Watts podcast my friend Rifra lent me.

The best story about *whatever it is* I've ever heard.

Scientifically inspired spiritual godlessness, you might call it (if a little tipsy at the time).

It goes like this: (or something like this...)

It's *alive* – of course it is – it's me, new and old. (And you, too – what we all are...)

It's more than just alive, though – it's everything, living and non-living alike.

—At least it is if you believe the story science tells us about the Big Bang as the start of how things are now, the universe still expanding from then on in, us being as much a part of it as the non-living parts (and vice versa), and us and our awareness and experience being one of an infinity

of wave-fronts of its expansion.

—Those little inner voices of ours constantly plashing new thoughts, new words and music, new visions and other imaginings, out into the blackness of ‘inner’ space as the expansion proceeds.

...Let there be light, you might say – or the absence of darkness, at least.

The absence of absence.

...And I do believe it, I think.

I believe it in the sense that, where the human soul or self – the me in me and the you in you – is concerned, *nothing is true, everything is permitted*.

And, yes – of course – in the sense that *it matters little what you believe, so long as you don't altogether believe it*.

I believe it in the sense that here is a perspective on me and my place in the world that captures some of the wonder of our being whether it turns out it's completely literally true or not.

A perspective that says something about who I am – who we all are – that has a silver sliver of truth in it.

A perspective with enough fictish play in it to countenance the incredible: like the thought – stray thought – that Creation itself, this *whatever it is* we all are, is as close to God the mother and father, God the creator and destroyer, God the awesome and timeless (no start-up

‘tricks’ required) as we’re ever likely to find ourselves.

A perspective that anyway recognises our own little bubbling hot spring of creation – seething and spurting and squirting its searing scintillae of simmering songs and sonnets, aberrant arcs and axioms, mystical MOs and Matts (and disparate doubts and deities) out into the wonderful wobbly windfall of whatever this all is – as part of a greater ongoing Creation that began to be way back when-never and doesn’t seem to want to stop.

A new star here; a freshly picked haiku there.

Keeping the game going.

Keeping the balls in play.

Dancers on the edge of oblivion, carried away by the sheer improbability of whatever it is this all is.

Hanging here, tripping the light fantastic...

Watching it all go bang...



## Epilogue

...Because life is

an end in itself

quipped the clown

of Creation

(thinking of  
bottoms...)

## **A Faint Cuckoo**

*In which our heroic budgie finally lets you get a word in edgeways as he fesses up to more or less everything... And his young sidekick (one pfennig short of a score) is outed (herewith) as the hidden claw behind the infamous Tuten Leswan, scurrilous purveyor of transcendence propaganda and shameless flatterer of potential recruits to the Fictish struggle for world domination.*

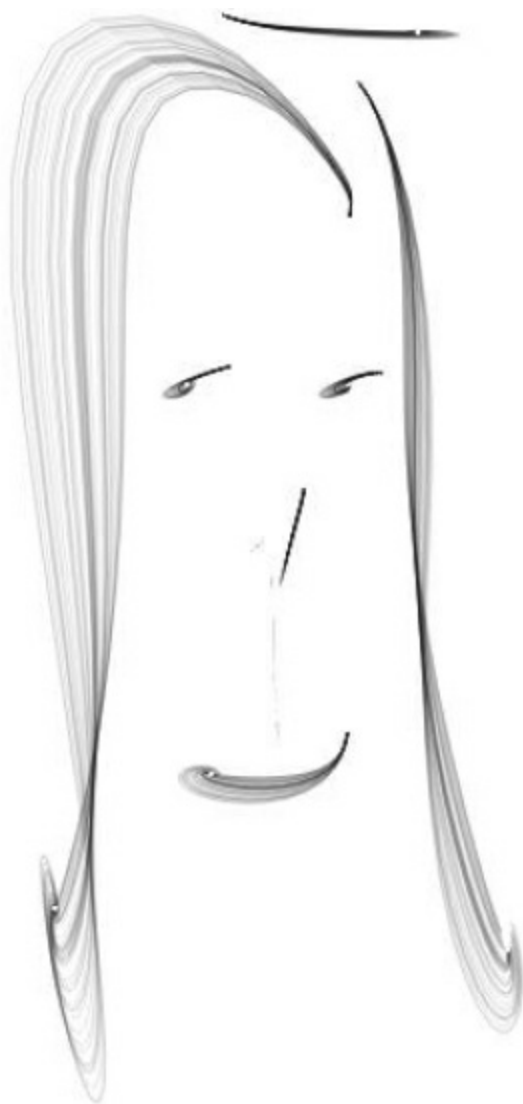
*But you'd already twigged who I probably was all on your lonesome, hadn't you, my wonder?*

*Course you had! Star quality oozing out of every pore!*

*Slicker than a chilli-oiled cucumber, probably!*

*Whippy-snappy as a dominatrix in heat...*

**Tuten Leswan**



*Fict: World Domination Is Us*

## What Has It Got In Its...

I know. I thought I was finished too. But no...

As the last word of my epic slips on the soap and sucks off down the slatty plughole of time, the question of how true it is seems worth a final meander.

Cross my heart, most of it hopped along just the way I said it did.

—Always allowing for the fact that it's my unique take on the truth of things;

...that I chose which bits to include and omit and the order of their presentation;

...that I may have indulged in bashful or playful sleight of mind short of lying here and there;

...that there's many a slip twixt thought and script at the best of times;

...that sometimes I was mostly just talking things out to myself as stuff changed around in my head (and I'm not even sure about every nook and fanny even now)...

—And that anyway I'm as capable as the next person of fooling myself, getting things wrong, or not knowing which way is up... (As well as a few other things I'll confess to below.)

Some of what happened only burst through as I forged and foraged, of course: as thoughts were mined,

perspectives panned, and scenarios imagined.

I can see that stuff as true – because it happened to me, and turned me inside out as I wrote – but you might have a different take on it...

—Especially when I tell you that my own wee corner of the great *whatever it is* re-jigged my name a bit and dreamt up Den Holson somewhere along the way – adding his Fict made fact(ish) to the growing repertoire of nutters rattling around in here, grabbing this spin as his soulcatcher play, and letting him go off elsewhere on a few additional adventures of his own (singing a merry ditty and spouting poetry, I imagine, with Nineteen at the helm and a great raucous parrot on his Long John shoulder).

—And that it was (I now realise) probably old Mr Put-yourself-down-before-they-do Me – worried we'd lose you with our humdrum – had Tuten put the laudy mockers on after the fact, keep things spinning along. Nineteen was, like, *totally* innocent, man. (Whatever Tuten tells you.)

...Unless, of course, it was him using me using him using Tuten using deep, deep subterfuge, or something.

—Or the great *whatever it is* moving miraculously through me in the faint hope of flannelling a Fictish finesse past a class act like yourself...

*(Full of wii, me; you got that, right? Course you did!)*

But, fine, yes... if you want to say that these and other little departures I'll get to presently make the whole thing one big fiction – even one big lie – be my guest. I might even agree with you when the wind's in the right direction and there's an *brrrr!* in the month or something.

...I mostly prefer my story and I'm sticking to it, though. That, and waiting to see what challenges the world throws at my presumption (and maybe muttering *sotto voce* that, when you're soulcatching, fact and fiction are partners in crime; lovers not strangers).

Besides... the truth will out, right? Even the furthest-flung fantasy can still frame a Fictish fact or five in its finagle most days of the week; absolutely it can. Wouldn't still be with us if you hadn't spotted that one – *right, smarty pants?*

—Okay, so I probably did make the occasional adjust or embellish for the sake of getting a thought or a feeling across better, heightening a drama or two, making the story more interesting, or making myself look better than I maybe deserved here and there. More than probably, even...

What can I tell you? It's what we do, isn't it? What it says on the tin... It's why we have that thing we say... You know, the one that goes: forgive me sir, madam, forgive – make allowances! Like you, I am, after all, only...

## About the author



Den Holson was born in Dundee and currently lives in Glasgow with his wife and long time friend, who he met at university in Edinburgh. They have two grown up children.

Once a milk boy, a sort of tailor, a library systems officer, and a digital research manager, he now spends his time messing about with words, having recently produced an album of self-penned songs called *Take Me As You Find Me*, a book of 'short poems and other word games' called *Disarmament Talks*, and now this little number, *Human*.

Like the rest of us, Den is largely a figment of his own imagination, but that's okay 'cos he has a website now: <http://www.denholsen.com/>.